New Testament
Toaru Majutsu no Index 7

Kamijou Touma awakens to find himself trapped in a dark room. He was sent there by the double spy Tsuchimikado Motoharu. Apparently, another enemy magician has entered Academy City and plans to use a spiritual item to destroy some of the academies.

After being given the mission of stopping the spiritual item's large-scale spell from being activated, Kamijou quickly escapes that dark room!!

...but he finds himself in the locker room of a prestigious high-class girls' school.

Kamijou's misfortune has exhilaratingly burst out once more. While labeled as a pervert and chased by violent school girls, he is spotted by Misaka Mikoto. Just as he thinks checkmate has come...someone "fortunately" holds out a helping hand.

It is Shokuhou Misaki. The Mental Out girl from Tokiwadai Middle School who is the #5 esper.

Is this meeting the result of a coincidence or did "someone" set it up to happen?

When science and magic cross paths, the story begins!

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新約 とある魔術の禁書目録(インデックス)⑦

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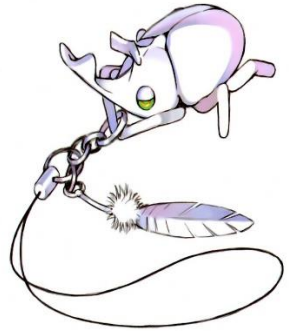

Kamachi Kazuma

I sometimes look at signs from the back. It is lovely how something so normal can look so different if you change how you look at it. I like how seeing a mix of things behind the scenes like this somehow makes me feel like I can stock up on more trivial knowledge.

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Toaru Majutsu no Index 1~22
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Heavy Object Series (6 Books Total)
The Zashiki Warashi of Intellectual Village 1 & 2
A Simple Survey
A Simple Monitoring
The Circumstances Leading to Waltraute's Marriage

Illustrator: Haimura Kiyotaka

I am slowly drawing in the back country of Hiroshima.

"U-um, but the black Santa Claus only takes away bad children."
Intellectual Girl who goes to the same school as Fremea
Azumi
"No, Santa Claus exists! In the first place, I know the truth!!"
Girl who attends an elementary school in Academy City District 13
Fremea Seivelun
新約
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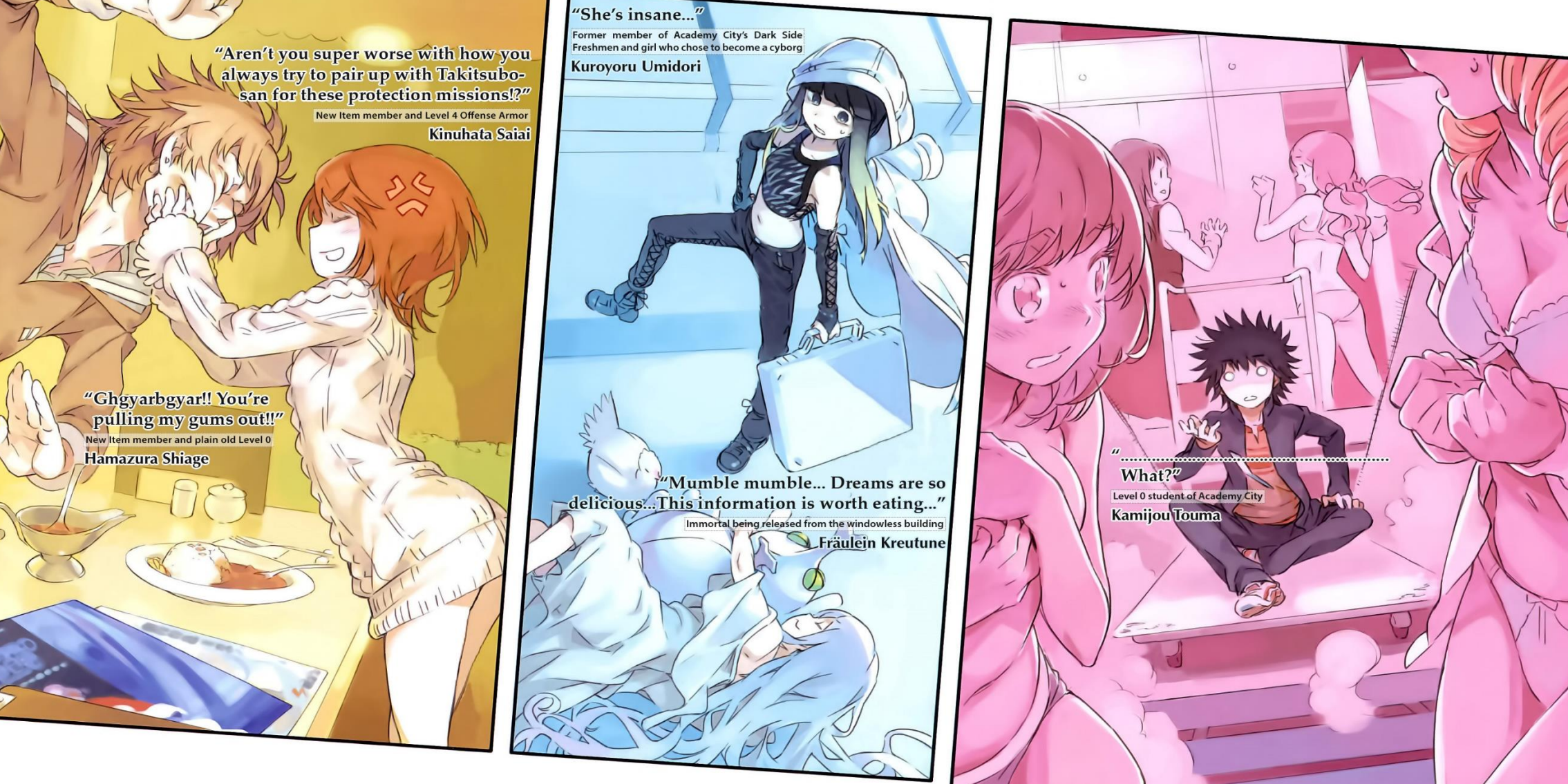
Girl's_School.
Foreign_matter.
Dead_Girl.
Agitate_Halation.
Total_Hero.
to_the_Main_Line.

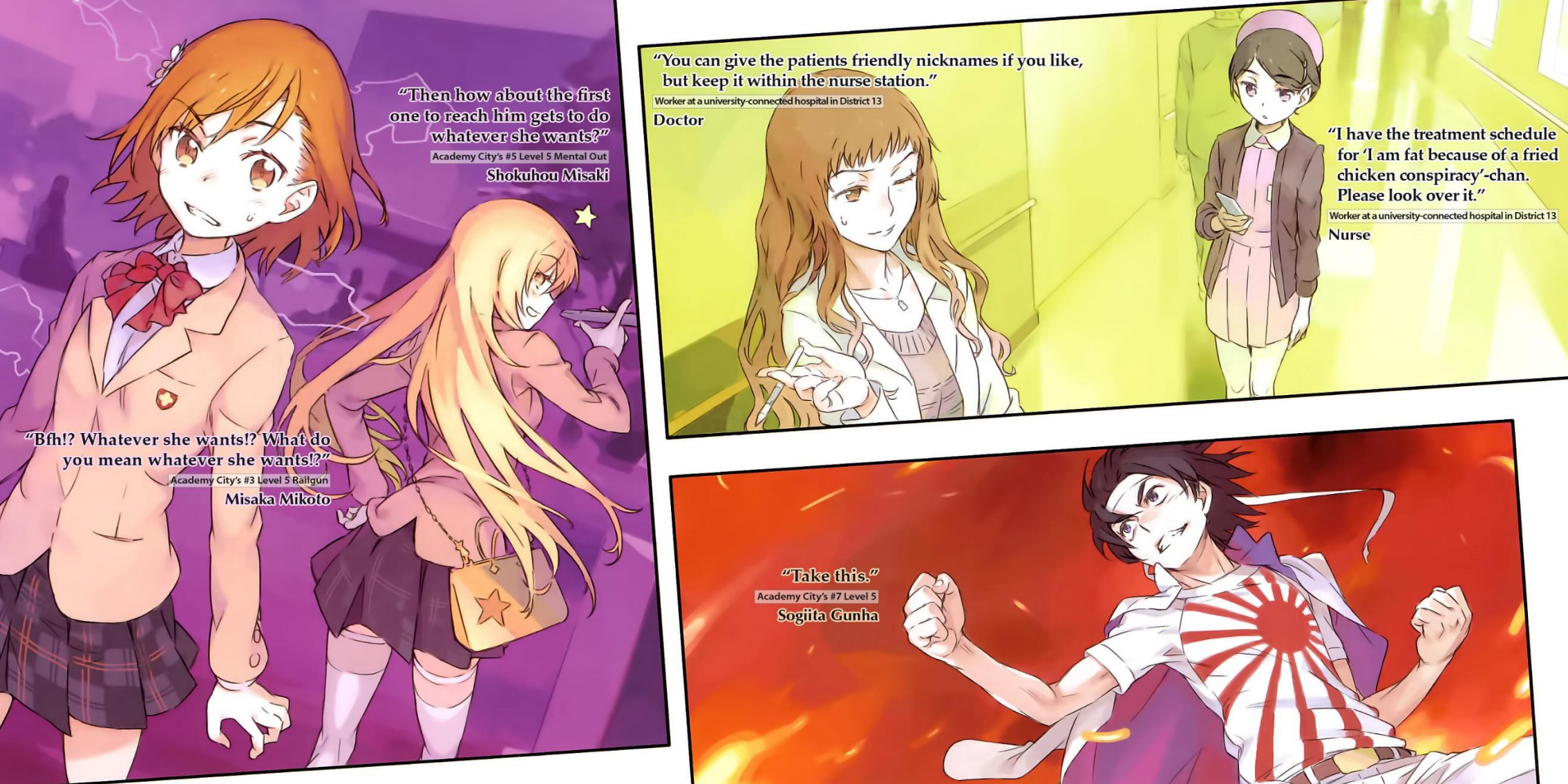
"Ladiiiiiies aaand gentle-meeeeeeeeeeen!! Thank you for coming to today's punish-ment conceeeerrrrrrrrttttt!!"

Girl who stood up to help a certain girl

Fusou Ayame

Designed by **H**irokazu **W**atanabe(2725 Inc.)


"Aren't you super worse with how you always try to pair up with Takitsubo-san for these protection missions!?"
New Item member and Level 4 Offense Armor
Kinuhata Saiai
"Ghgyarbgyar!! You're pulling my gums out!!"
New Item member and plain old Level 0
Hamazura Shiage
"She's insane..."
Former member of Academy City's Dark Side Freshmen and girl who chose to become a cyborg
Kuroyoru Umidori
"Mumble mumble... Dreams are so delicious...This information is worth eating..."
Immortal being released from the windowless building
Fräulein Kreutune
"
What?"
Level 0 student of Academy City
Kamijou Touma


"Then how about the first one to reach him gets to do whatever she wants?"
Academy City's #5 Level 5 Mental Out
Shokuhou Misaki
"Bfh!? Whatever she wants!? What do you mean whatever she wants!?"
Academy City's #3 Level 5 Railgun
Misaka Mikoto
"You can give the patients friendly nicknames if you like, but keep it within the nurse station."
Worker at a university-connected hospital in District 13
Doctor
"I have the treatment schedule for 'I am fat because of a fried chicken conspiracy'-chan. Please look over it."
Worker at a university-connected hospital in District 13
Nurse
"Take this."
Academy City's #7 Level 5
Sogiita Gunha

Prologue: A Sweet Smelling Inviolable Territory. *Girl's_School.*

When he opened his eyes, Kamijou Touma had trouble deciding whether he had actually woken up or if he was still asleep.

This was not because his mind was hazy. He actually felt sharply focused.

It was because he was surrounded by darkness in all directions.

(What…huh…? Wh-where am I?)

Kamijou felt around with his hands in the pitch black darkness. The area was small. Incredibly small. Before he extended his arms even halfway, he reached a hard wall and his legs could extend no further than half-bent. His movement was blocked by a smooth plastic feeling.

Due to certain circumstances, he had grown used to sleeping in the bathtub of his dorm room's bathroom, but even he felt this space was cramped.

Various possibilities began racing through his mind. Had he been stuffed into a refrigerator? Had he been buried alive?

But then…

What sounded like the amplified sound of an insect flying reverberated throughout the small space. At the same moment, a light came on in the darkness. This was not a powerful light that filled the space evenly like a fluorescent light. It was a single point of light in the darkness as if from a firefly or a sparkler. Although this light was brighter than those examples.

But even that small light blinded him at first.

Finally, Kamijou noticed the light was contained within a rectangle about the size of a business card. He then realized what it was.

"My phone…?"

It was a fairly outdated model of cell phone that had been beaten up due to Kamijou's dirty lifestyle. It was supposed to fold in two, but it was lying open on the floor(?).

It seemed someone was calling him.

"…"

However, Kamijou was focused less on the phone and more on the cramped space that was now dimly lit. Unlike in the pitch black darkness from

before, he could vaguely see the outlines of the area. Normally, he would have been relieved to gain more information, but this was no normal situation. The area was small. It was much, much smaller than he had imagined. It may have been about the size of a washing machine. It was more a box than a room. Now that he could see the ceiling(?) right in front of his nose, he almost felt he was having trouble breathing.

Kamijou finally grabbed the phone.

He recognized the name displayed on the screen.

“Ts-Tsuchimikado?”

“We have no time to spare, so I’ll keep this short, Kami-yan.”

Tsuchimikado Motoharu was his neighbor in the dorms and a classmate at his high school.

But he was also a spy for multiple groups who gathered information from both the science side and the magic side. His voice here was low, smooth, and heavy. That was the voice he used when speaking as that spy.

“A new magician has made their way into Academy City. If they aren’t stopped, the city will be greatly damaged.”

“A magician?” Kamijou frowned. “You mean another Gremlin member has entered the city?”

They had caused a lot of trouble just the other day.

The Norse-centric magic cabal named Gremlin and Ollerus’s group had confronted each other over a woman named Fräulein Kreutune. Their conflict had ended up in the middle of Academy City of all places.

If Kamijou and the others had not manipulated events from behind the scenes, they would have caused chaotic battles throughout the city and most of those battles would have turned the large parts of the city into rubble.

Was that happening again?

That thought sent a chill down Kamijou’s spine, but…

“No,” readily denied Tsuchimikado. “This time it’s a Vajrayana-style magician. I doubt they are related to Gremlin.”

“Why someone else?”

“There is more to the magic side than Gremlin. Some magicians that have nothing to do with their actions might see a way to take advantage of the commotion they caused.”

That was very bad.

Kamijou tried to hold his head in his hand, but his elbow struck the wall of the cramped space.

“The enemy’s name is Umezaki Yuuga. As I said, this is a Vajrayana-style magician…but they are not all that powerful. In fact, they’re quite weak. You should be more than enough to handle them, Kami-yan.”

“But isn’t this an emergency?”

“Thanks to a certain spiritual item,” said Tsuchimikado as if spitting out something bitter. “The Altar of the Wisdom King. It’s a special Homa altar this magician uses. …Would you like an explanation on what a Homa altar is?”

“Please.”

“It’s a tool Vajrayanans use for mental training. They burn special wood and let the flames and smoke cleanse them of all worldly thoughts. They come in different sizes. The smaller ones are like a candle you can hold between your fingers and the larger ones are more like a camp fire. There’s also the Inner Homa where you picture the Homa altar in your head.”

Kamijou tried to tilt his head in confusion, but felt an odd pain in his back. He had no idea how long he had been trapped like this, but the unnatural pose was causing his joints to scream in protest.

“How big is this one?” he asked.

“It’s made to be mobile. It folds up like an outdoor table. When folded up, it’s no bigger than a duralumin case.”

Kamijou tried to twist his body around in the small space and an unpleasant cracking noise came from his back.

“Normally, a Homa altar is used to alter the user’s mind. The altar cleanses worldly thoughts to increase one’s focus, so they are not all that dangerous. However, the Altar of the Wisdom King takes advantage of that ability.”

“?”

“In other words, it acts outwardly rather than inwardly. It is a special altar created to alter the minds of others. Once it is used, it will suck out all of the knowledge and skills of everyone within five kilometers. …Now what if that was done in an important area of Academy City?”

“They would steal all the information on esper powers…”

“Not only that, but the Altar of the Wisdom King forcibly rips out that knowledge and skill. Scientifically speaking, you could say it destroys the

synapses and autonomic nerves. Not only will those people be unable to walk, they won't even be able to breathe or keep their heart beating."

Not a single aspect of this was amusing.

Any area in Academy City was densely populated. If that spiritual item was activated and exterminated everyone within five kilometers, just how many people would die?

"What's the time limit?"

"Two hours at the worst. But even being generous, no more than three hours."

Two hours. 120 minutes.

That was too little time. Even in a walled off city, Kamijou doubted he would coincidentally run into this magician just by searching around at random.

"So this…um, Vajrayana person…"

"Umezaki Yuuga."

"Do you know where they are trying to set up the Altar of the Wisdom King?"

"Yes, but the circumstances make it hard to get in. I don't know if this Umezaki is after the knowledge or simply trying to kill, but they are attacking an important area. Someone with no official position will be forced to enter illegally even in order to save the day."

"And you're saying doing that will be hard?"

"Especially for you or me. Honestly, sexual discrimination is just wrong."

"What?" said Kamijou in confusion.

Tsuchimikado then revealed the problem they faced.

"It's the School Garden. That garden of maidens that is jointly controlled by five prestigious girls' schools including Tokiwadai Middle."

Kamijou let out a groan.

That was indeed a treasure trove of important information related to psychic powers development, but it was about the worst possible place for boys like Kamijou or Tsuchimikado.

"…What are we supposed to do?"

"We won't have a problem if Umezaki Yuuga is caught by the security of those girls' schools, but somehow I doubt that will happen. We have to do

this knowing how unreasonable it is. We have to sneak in after this magician."

"But this is the School Garden, right!? Tokiwadai alone is a monstrous school supported by the #3 and #5. They're full of cutting edge technology that isn't allowed outside the schools and they have the facilities and budget needed to protect it all. How are we supposed to sneak in there!?"

In all seriousness, Kamijou would not be surprised if the situation progressed similarly to a child being chased by an attack dog after crossing a fence to retrieve a ball. He might even be opposed with firearms. And on top of that, magic was not officially recognized by Academy City, so no one would believe him if he explained the situation after being caught. He was certain he would end up labeled a giant pervert on the headlines of the net news.

"The situation may be serious, but it isn't as bad as sneaking into a government leader's house," said Tsuchimikado.

"I was imagining this being more like sneaking into a fenced-off military base."

"Don't worry. *I've already taken care of it, nyahh!!*"

After that shout, Tsuchimikado hung up.

Kamijou did not even have time to frown.

All of a sudden, orange sparks flew through the air with an odd bursting noise. It was like watching a fuse burn on fast forward. It seemed the box had been dismantled with gunpowder because it split part to the left and right as if Kamijou Touma was being born from a peach. He finally got a peek at the outside world.

He saw a space lined with tall, narrow lockers.

He saw a space filled with backless benches.

He saw a space that was filled with a somehow sweet aroma.

He saw a space where *girls in their underwear were chatting as if their state of undress was normal.*

He saw a space where high class ringlet curl girls in their underwear were using their giant hair irons that were the size of wooden swords to have mock swordfights.

To sum it up, he saw a girls' locker room in some school.

"……
……What?"

Kamijou was at a loss for words as a total of approximately twenty gazes turned in his direction.

Everyone remained silent.

After a few seconds had passed, Kamijou finally realized he had been stuffed inside a box on top of a pushcart. The situation was straight out of a hidden camera show for performers known for their reactions, but there was no camera.

Who had done this?

That was obvious. It had obviously been that rotten, Hawaiian shirt-wearing, sunglasses-wearing, nyah nyah onmyouji!

But Kamijou did not have time to explain.

The situation was made all the worse by the cell phone in his hand.

The small digital camera lens on the device would invite even more misunderstanding.

And then a loud voice erupted.

However, it was not a cute "Kyaaah!"

"Death to the street performing voyeur! Kill hiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiimmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm!!"

"Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!! Why do I have to fall prey to the world's lamest false accusatioooooooooooonnnnnnnnnnnnn!?"

He rolled out of the way of a strange mountain of flames and pillar of ice before fleeing outside through a stainless steel door. He seemed to be in a building meant for school sports clubs, but he had no idea exactly where he was.

As he scrambled away from that locker room, a female student he came across screamed. As he ran from her, another girl screamed and then another. At this point Kamijou finally noticed something odd.

Why had he been running into nothing but girls?

"It can't be…"

All of a sudden, Kamijou found himself running out of a school entrance with a bronze sign saying "Private Shidarezakura Academy". As he fled into the European-style street, he found nothing but girls, girls, girls everywhere he looked. Kamijou Touma—or rather, the presence of a boy—caused looks of fear and screams from everyone on the street.

At this point, even Kamijou could guess what had happened.

“That sunglasses-wearing nyah nyah bastard. Did he pack me in a box and ship me to the School Garden!?”

He did not have time to explain the situation.

Even now, Umezaki Yuuga was preparing the Altar of the Wisdom King.

If it was activated, the lives of everyone within five kilometers would be lost and information on Academy City’s cutting edge technology and psychic powers development would be stolen.

To keep that from happening…

To save the lives of every single person in the School Garden…

Kamijou Touma had to accept the label of pervert and capture the magician who was running rampant in this garden of maidens!

Chapter 1: Altar of the Wisdom King. *Foreign_matter.*

Part 1

"Where did that pervert go!?"

"He sent himself to the lacrosse team's locker room in that tiny box!?"

"That is actually rather impressive in and of itself… I almost feel sorry for him. He is probably the type of idiot who could think of nothing more than sneaking into the women's bath even if he had a revolutionary world-changing power like stopping time or invisibility. Curse that hidden camera show reaction performer. He must die!!"

"Kill him, kill him!!"

The words of the girls running along the main road stabbed into the fugitive's heart.

Kamijou was observing the situation while hiding in a nearby alley with his back pressed up against a building wall. He was also near tears.

"Dammit, Tsuchimikado. Answer, answer, answer, answer!!"

Kamijou was pressing buttons on his phone with his thumb, but the boy who had created this tragic situation would not answer. Eventually, Kamijou received an announcement saying his call had been rejected.

"Why!? That bastard shoved all the responsibility onto me and then disappeared!!"

Kamijou only knew the term Altar of the Wisdom King. He did not actually know what shape or color it was. There was only so much he could do to save the people of the School Garden.

As far as a pure search went, the School Garden was only two kilometers square. While that was still a lot of space, full use of two hours gave him a much better chance of finding his target randomly than if he had to deal with the entirety of Academy City.

However, Kamijou had been thrown into an area where boys were forbidden with no preparation time whatsoever. If he carelessly walked around, he would be arrested. And it was entirely possible he would be ganged up on by high level espers before being arrested. If that happened, he could be "accidentally" killed in the process.

He could not give up and go home, but he could not brazenly walk around either.

He had to carefully sneak around, but doing so would cost him a lot of time.

Before he took any action, he needed to come up with some likely locations to search. That way he could locate the Altar of the Wisdom King as quickly as possible and defeat Umezaki Yuuga, the Vajrayana-style magician preparing it.

(He said it was a Homa altar, right? Wouldn't an old occult antique like that stand out in this scientific city? Then again…)

Kamijou looked around.

The entire area was modeled after a "traditional" European city.

Due to the tastes of a high-class girls' society, that kind of old-style antique was everywhere. He was worried the Altar of the Wisdom King would blend in too well.

(But Umezaki Yuuga has the same restrictions as I do. …And I'll be really pissed if it turns out he's actually a girl with a masculine name or he can turn invisible.)

The magician would naturally not want anyone to interfere with the ceremony.

Which meant…

Kamijou's top priority was not getting captured.

After that was searching for places where a Japanese antique could be left without raising suspicion.

"These are high-class girls' schools. They probably have tea ceremony clubs, flower arrangement clubs, calligraphy clubs, and all sorts of old-fashioned stuff…"

That biased opinion would have annoyed a "real" high-class girl like Misaka Mikoto, but she would probably blast him to smithereens if she knew he had snuck into the School Garden.

(Whatever I do, I need a map first. The School Garden is filled with secrets, so the satellite maps are kept private. My first goal is to get one from somewhere.)

Suddenly, he heard the (sadly not high-pitched) voices of numerous girls from the main road. It seemed a wild animal search party had already been formed out of volunteers. Kamijou immediately looked further down the narrow alley.

(No, I have no idea where this leads. They might be advancing from both directions or it might lead straight to another major road. I need a safer way out of this.)

Kamijou glanced around the straight and narrow alley, twisted his head around, and then froze in place.

What he saw was…

Part 2

Multiple sets of footsteps entered the narrow alley.

“What!? He is not here!”

“Was that witness testimony inaccurate?”

“…U-um, senpai. That was not some new type of UMA not recorded in any animal encyclopedia or a materialization of all the girls here’s desires for some as-yet-unseen gentleman, was it?”

“He was nowhere near pretty enough to be that.”

“Oh, of course!! No one would want a reaction performer like that!!”

(You don’t have to insult me like that!) cursed Kamijou in his heart.

He was up above them.

He had pressed his arms and legs against the buildings on either side of the narrow alley to climb up to the fifth floor. To make sure they would not look up and spot him, he had climbed onto the roof and rolled onto his back.

(Dammit. Tsuchimikado still isn’t answering.)

Kamijou was staring at his phone, but then…

“Oh, wait. This will be sending out an unknown cell phone signal.”

Kamijou’s body stiffened in fear.

He frantically turned the phone off, but it was too late.

“Are you sure you were not mistaken? There is no one here.”

“There would not be a dot here for no reason. That reason might be an error, but there has to be a reason for it to be displayed here.”

“Wait a second. This map only shows two dimensions. It does not display any differences in height.”

“In other words…”

Kamijou held his breath.

The Altar of the Wisdom King would activate within two hours, so he could not let himself be captured here.

“Is he underground!? Did he climb into a manhole!?”

“He continues to display more and more of the special techniques you would expect of a pervert! This goes beyond a mere performer! Horokawa-san, do not think of this as practice. We will use our sabres for real!!”

“But if this mysterious being can move freely within the sewer, does that mean he is a monster similar to a white alligator?”

After he heard the footsteps leave, Kamijou rolled onto his stomach.

He stuck his deactivated cell phone in his pocket.

It seemed the wild animal search party was running around with the fencing sabres from a high-class girl’s school. From what he had heard, he would not simply be poked at if he was found. They would be trying to stab him through the chest and out the back.

(I can’t travel on the surface. I-I guess I’ll have to travel by rooftop.)

No matter how many secrets the School Garden had, it was still made for students. Signs and pamphlets with maps could be found here and there.

The problem was how to check one of those without anyone seeing him.

(If I had binoculars, I could check one of the signs from a rooftop. If only I could use my phone. Then I could zoom in with the camera. Well, finding some generic tool to use like binoculars will probably be easier than getting a map of an area with as many secrets as this.)

Kamijou forced himself to think positively as he tried to suppress his trembling.

Travelling by rooftop naturally meant he would have to jump between buildings with no lifeline.

“Wow. I can’t hesitate. It’s all over if I hesitate.”

He looked down from the edge of the roof and wiped sweat from his brow.

It was only about a meter to the next building, but this was not the same as jumping over a puddle on the sidewalk. The fact that he would die if he fell through that gap provided a different type of fear than that of simply falling from a cliff.

(Fortunately, I don’t have to worry about being chased by those girls if I use the roofs. I can take it slowly. Just calm down and focus. I don’t need any

more strength than I usually use. If I move the same as I always do, I can easily clear this gap.)

Kamijou took several deep breathes and backed up away from the “chasm”. He was preparing the space for his running jump. He gave himself 10 meters. If he did not hesitate and let his momentum carry him after he kicked off the concrete roof, he would reach the neighboring building.

Part 3

Misaka Mikoto used magnetism to jump up far above the stone-paved ground. She pressed the bottom of her feet against a building that had proper base isolation and rebar despite looking European. She then took another large leap.

She used this process to reach the roof of the building in only two steps.

(Honestly. I know I can’t do anything about it since it’s part of the school’s Curriculum, but I just wish the school would handle transportation.)

School had already let out for the day, so sports clubs could be heard jogging here and there. The seven Level 5s of Academy City had specialized analysis and research facilities created for them. The other students were usually jealous of this, but it actually meant she had to match her schedule to what the adults wanted regardless of when she was supposed to have free time.

And those supplementary Level 5 facilities were not all contained within the grounds of Tokiwadai Middle School. She sometimes had to leave the school grounds and travel to an external facility.

(My free time after school is limited enough already with the dorm’s curfew and then they suddenly cut into it further by scheduling an analysis in that external facility. I need to use any shortcut I can to leave as much free time as possible.)

Mikoto had those worthless thoughts as she jumped from rooftop to rooftop. Her strict dorm supervisor would lecture her if she found out about this, but Mikoto did not hesitate because the entire problem stemmed from the early curfew set by that same dorm supervisor.

And then…

She saw something that should not have existed. For an instant, she thought she was seeing a hallucination brought on by her private feelings. She started to blush as she analyzed why she was seeing this hallucination, but

then she realized something did not add up. She would not be seeing this without the influence of some external factor.

And so she finally reached the much too obvious question.

Why?

Why was that idiot inside the School Garden where no boys were allowed?

"……
……"

Mikoto thought silently for a moment, but could not come up with a reasonable answer.

She realized she did not need a reasonable answer for this.

And so she switched over her focus.

"Yooooooooooooooooooooooooooouuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu!! What the hell are you doing here, you perveeeeeeeeeeeeeeerrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttt!!"

"Noooo! Why does the most intense and troublesome one have to show up now!?"

Kamijou Touma frantically began running. It looked like he was planning to jump the narrow gap between buildings. Realizing that, Mikoto swiftly ran forward to capture the criminal. However, no outside observer would have thought this was a case of "Ah ha ha hee hee hee." "C'mon, wait up☆" It looked more like he was being pursued by the Jumping Babaa or a Kuchisake-Onna.

Mikoto was moving faster, but Kamijou was closer to the edge of the roof. When Mikoto realized the boy had enough of a running start to easily clear the gap, she changed her tactic.

She manipulated magnetism.

She focused on the metal of his belt buckle and pulled him back toward her just as he began to fly through the air.

"Hnn!!"

"Ngwah!?"

To her, it felt like she was holding a thick wire pulling him toward her, but then that wire completely disappeared. It was as if the fishing line had snapped and the fish got away.

Whatever it was the boy used to negate supernatural powers had taken effect.

However…

“Huh?”

She suddenly realized the boy had vanished.

He had been trying to jump between rooftops but had been partially slowed down with no way of pushing himself forward.

Which meant…

“No way… He fell?”

Mikoto’s face grew pale, but then she heard a shrill girl’s voice and the sound of a dinner plate breaking against a wall.

“Fuck you!! Do you want me to beat you until you’re foaming at the mouth and every orifice too, you pervert!?”

“Me no speak Japanese!! Me no understand!!” shouted the boy in desperation.

After confirming that he was doing well, Mikoto resumed pursuit of her prey.

Part 4

After being rapidly decelerated in midair by a mysterious magnetic attack, Kamijou reinforced his reputation for misfortune by falling right into the gap between buildings. However, he desperately reached out and managed to grab onto the railing outside a window.

Letting go and dropping down would mean his death, so his only option was to climb into the window. However, a girl who seemed to work at the fancy shop inside splendidly attacked him repeatedly with brand-name tableware and he had to run across the storage room and into a hallway.

“This is horrible. This is so horrible it’s almost laughable!!”

Kamijou frowned as he tossed up a pair of opera glasses (printed with an animal mascot) he had found in the storage room.

With those opera glasses, he could check the signs on the road without climbing down to the ground.

However, Mikoto and the female store clerk knew where he was, so that wild animal search party would soon arrive at the building. Naturally, he could not head down to the surface, but heading up to the roof would only let Mikoto spot him again.

(Is my only option jumping from window to window? But I can't get a running start in the building. If I could place a ladder across the gap, I could make it…but I get the feeling this commotion is only growing larger.)

He had turned his phone off, so he could not check what time it was. According to a clock on the wall, 20 minutes had passed since his explosive birth in the girls' locker room.

(Could I tell Mikoto what's going on and get her help? No. I completely lost the timing for that. By the time she calms down, Umezaki Yuuga's Altar of the Wisdom King will have already destroyed everything!!)

Kamijou made up his mind. He could not afford to be caught, so he had to try to travel from window to window. He first headed for the staircase. If he was going to try it, he wanted to be on the 2nd or 3rd floor.

But something happened as soon as he set foot in the staircase.

"!?"

A single girl stood on the stairs leading down as if to block his path. She appeared to be middle school aged. She was short, had white skin, and had black bobbed hair. She somewhat resembled a Zashiki Warashi from an old picture book. She wore a blue sailor uniform instead of the Tokiwadai uniform, but she probably belonged to one of the five girl's schools that jointly controlled the School Garden.

(Not good…)

The girl looked small and delicate, but as a student of the School Garden, she likely had enough of an esper power to be useful in a fight. Depending on how she used it, her power might match or even exceed a gun or blade. That was bad enough on its own, but being stopped here could allow other high level espers to arrive.

He audibly gulped.

He could not decide whether to force his way past her or to look for another route.

As he hesitated, the bobbed hair girl opened her mouth to speak.

Kamijou naturally took a defensive stance.

A voice or a sound could possibly act as a trigger for some sort of esper power.

But…

"*Oh? I sent someone to increase my information gathering ability because I thought something exciting was happening, but it looks like I found something even more interesting than I was expecting.*"

"…?"

That voice sounded incredibly odd to Kamijou.

There was no problem with the tone or volume of the voice. As one would expect of a slender girl, it was a high-pitched soprano that sounded like it could cause a glass to vibrate. However, the intonation was oddly alluring. It was as if an adult's voice was being forced to sound younger with a voice changer.

Also, the actual words spoken were odd. The bobbed hair girl had said she "sent someone" despite standing right in front of Kamijou.

And then…

The bobbed hair girl spread her arms wide and ultimately brought one hand up to her eye in a horizontal peace sign.

As she gave a casual wink, Kamijou noticed something like a star in her eye.

This action did not fit at all with her original obedient image and she then spoke with a superior elegance.

"*I am Shokuhou Misaki, Academy City's #5 esper. Nice to meet you☆*"

Part 5

Misaka Mikoto burst through the door and into the fancy shop. She passed by a few other girls as she made her way further into the store, but she could not find the person she was looking for.

(He isn't here?)

She spotted a door behind the register that likely led to the employees only area, but the girl working in the store would stop her if she tried to force her way in.

But the same had to be the case for that spiky-haired boy.

She tried simply asking the girl behind the register.

"Um, was there a commotion up above a bit ago?"

"Eh? Oh, yes there was. I found it a bit hard to believe myself."

Mikoto had the girl summarize what she had "found a bit hard to believe". Someone had suddenly entered a fourth floor hallway through a window and this intruder had been a boy, something that was rare (or rather, unheard of) in the School Garden.

A worker's scandal was one thing, but the girl had no obligation to hide a crime of a complete outsider. She may have even thought trying to hide it would create some rumors that would negatively affect the store's image.

But…

“Eh? You told me where he got in, but where did he go after that?”

“I don’t know. I heard a team made up of mostly teachers is being sent after him, so the other girls are waiting at the exits to make sure he does not leave.”

It seemed the situation was continuing to grow in scope.

Although given the special characteristics of the School Garden, that had not been hard to predict.

(Oh, honestly.)

Mikoto left the store and then used magnetism to jump straight up. She supported her body with the rebar in the wall and entered the third floor similarly to how a certain criminal had.

But she could not find the boy.

In fact, all the workers not guarding the exits must have been evacuated because the place was deserted. A deafening silence filled the area. With how quiet it was, Mikoto felt she would hear any noise on the floor above and below this one as well.

(Has he already left the building? But the workers are guarding all the exits.)

Mikoto looked around and her gaze landed on a window.

Just like on the roof, the gap between windows was narrow enough for even a normal person who could not manipulate magnetism to jump across.

“Hm?”

When she entered the room with the window and stuck her head out to look, Mikoto frowned.

She looked out to the end of the alley compressed between two walls.

On the main road’s sidewalk, she saw around 10 girls wearing the Tokiwadai Middle School winter uniform.

(They’re from Shokuhou Misaki’s clique. What are they doing here?)

In Tokiwadai Middle School, students gathered into cliques in the name of independent learning and research cooperation. Unlike school clubs, the cliques had no teacher act as an advisor and were not officially recorded with the school. However, some students viewed joining a clique as giving one a certain type of status.

Shokuhou Misaki was the “queen” who controlled the largest clique in the school. Those girls were a lot like her hangers-on.

(Those two are definitely in one of the sports clubs. Club activities shouldn’t be over yet, so were they called here for some urgent task?)

Mikoto was mainly focused on one clique member who had splendid ringlet curls. She was carrying a large brand-name gym bag over her shoulder.

Yes.

A gym bag large enough to hold a grown man if he was curled up in the fetal position.

(…This is suspicious.)

The bag must have been heavy because the ringlet curls girl would occasionally lose her balance and stagger a bit as she left the fancy shop with other girls from the clique.

(I can’t think of any logical reason for Shokuhou to be in contact with that idiot…but it’s entirely possible she would do something just because I know him.)

Mikoto did not even know why that boy was wandering around the School Garden. This added another level of unknowns on top of that, so guessing what was going on had grown much more difficult.

At times like this, it was best to find a way to simplify the situation.

(Whatever is going on, I just need to force that idiot to explain it to me!)

Part 6

After watching Misaka Mikoto run off in the wrong direction, the black bobbed hair girl walked unsteadily away from the fancy shop’s exit. She was one of the girls who Mikoto had passed by on the first floor of the shop.

The girl used both hands to carry a bunch of flowers so large it would be better suited to decorate the front of the store than to arrange in a vase. It was over 150 cm tall, so it was unclear if she could actually see in front of her.

“Sorry about this. This girl is doing some basic work at the official school store which doubles as social sciences training, so the only way to get through the employees only door was to bring out all of my acting ability to say she was taking out the trash.”

Kamijou Touma was buried in all of the flowers.

The background behind him was filled with flower petals, but it did not make him look handsome.

The leaves were crushed and it all stank of dirt.

“I’m not sure I understand that, but is it like a part-time job?”

“This girl is in middle school. Also, no student with enough wealth ability to be in the School Garden would need to work. Girls who are worried they are so sheltered they will have difficulty getting along in society will get a job almost as a good luck charm.”

Working after school just to know how commoners lived seemed exactly the sort of thing a celebrity would try. Kamijou Touma could not be more jealous as he was the type of working student that raayu was made for and he barely scraped by yet had no time for a part-time job.

“How far do we need to go?” asked the girl.

“Just as far as a sign showing a map of the entire School Garden. …By the way, was there really no other way of keeping me safe? Ugh, I feel like there are caterpillars in my mouth.”

“I told you it would have been easier to travel with my clique pressing their backs against you.”

“…I don’t think I could do that.”

“(That way sounded like it would have a lot more amusement ability.)”

Kamijou wanted to ensure the accusations of him being a tremendous pervert remained false accusations. Even if he had a good reason for doing so, he did not want to become a pervert based on his own choices.

To outside observers, it looked like the bobbed hair girl was holding the flowers he was hiding in, so her lips were located much closer than he expected as she spoke. He had to be careful that his right hand did not touch her body.

“Today certainly has taken an odd turn,” she commented.

“By the way…um, #5 was it? Why did you help me? I doubt you understood that explanation. You didn’t know what I meant when I was talking about magic, right?”

“Oh?” The bobbed hair girl’s eyeballs rolled around once in her head before looking back at Kamijou’s face. “*I suppose hearing that from you at a time like this certainly is a lot like you. But make no mistake. I am more annoyed than impressed.*”

“What? Have you seen magic before or something?”

“No, I have not. But I have a reason to trust what you say that is completely unrelated to that cheap nonsense.”

“What…do you mean?” Kamijou frowned while covered in flowers. “Have we met before by any chance?”

“If you are talking about the *side event ability of the Daihaseisai*, you are quite mistaken,” said the bobbed hair girl as if rolling a hard candy along the top of her tongue. “But you are always like this. Perhaps that is the proper form for our relationship ability. No matter how many times I ask or our paths cross, the answer is always the same. Saying this will probably make you angry just like back then, but perhaps that is my punishment for having this power. After all, these repeated coincidences cannot be explained logically☆”

Kamijou looked truly confused now, but before he could ask anything further, the bobbed hair girl suddenly stopped walking. They had reached an intersection with an even larger road. Here, people would be looking in their direction from 360 degrees around them.

They had arrived at a sign displaying a map of the entire School Garden.

Kamijou very nearly stuck his head out of the flowers while focusing on the sign, but he frantically stopped himself.

However…

“What? Over half of the blocks are grayed out.”

“Of course they are. This only needs to give the main entrances and service entrances for the five schools. The schools may jointly control the School Garden, but they are also rivals. Anyone who knows the value of information is not about to leave the details of their school on a public sign.”

That was a problem.

Kamijou had no idea where Umezaki Yuuga would set up the Altar of the Wisdom King, but he would not leave it on a major intersection like this. There had to be somewhere easier to set it up. Some blind spot no one would check or some facility where a Japanese antique would not stand out. Kamijou’s general strategy had been to determine where those places were and then go investigate them.

“That means I need the maps of each school as well. Am I going to have to sneak into every last school!?”

“Hee hee. Oh? It seems your choosing ability was right on target when you teamed up with me instead of Misaka-san.”

“What?”

“You want maps of the five schools, right? I can easily get you those. …After all, I have sent my preset to students in each of the schools.”

Her “preset” may have been some kind of hypnotic suggestion.

And that also meant she had spies in each of the rival schools Tokiwadai cooperated with.

(This is no time to worry about that.)

“If you can get the maps for me, please do. You probably wouldn’t understand, but the School Garden has only…90 minutes left. I wish I could have everyone evacuate, but I am in no position to have them do that.”

“Yes, yes. I believe you. If you say that is the case, then that must be the case.”

Kamijou found it disturbing how easily she accepted it, but this was no time to worry about that either.

“I am sending instructions around with my remote, so they should gather with the maps in five or ten minutes.”

He would be able to acquire the maps.

However, that was only the starting line. He had no other hints and only 90 minutes left. He did not have the time for a thorough search of the School Garden’s two kilometer square area. Also, travelling while buried in flowers was an excellent way of ensuring his immediate safety, but it was a slow means of transportation. If he was too slow, the number of possible locations he could search would be severely limited.

However…

That worry must have shown on his face because the bobbed hair girl grinned and tilted her head from very close by.

“Neh heh heh. I do have a bit of countermeasure ability for that problem☆”

“…?”

“The map group will take five or ten minutes to arrive, so how about we make a quick change of clothes while we wait?”

“H-hey!”

Kamijou sensed something very dangerous in those words, but the bobbed hair girl was the one holding the huge bunch of flowers. When she began walking, Kamijou had no choice in the matter.

He was practically dragged behind a nearby building. As soon as he entered the building, Kamijou smelled a chemical odor that reminded him of rubber or plastic.

“Okay, you can come out now.”

The bobbed hair girl tossed aside the huge bunch of flowers, forcing Kamijou into the open.

The room looked like a storage room for a clothing shop. A great number of cardboard boxes with a company logo on them were piled up to one side. The bobbed hair girl ripped off the packing tape sealing a nearby box and rummaged around inside.

“…What are you doing?”

“Neh heh heh. These are not normal products. They are replicas of Anti-Skill equipment.”

“What are those doing here?”

“For safety training! They are used for the ‘outside world simulation’ stage performances put on for the pure girls here.”

“Being a high-class girl sounds like a lot of work.”

“Even for a special performance, real male Anti-Skill members are not allowed here. Instead, girls play the role using replica equipment made with quite a bit of accuracy ability.”

In the School Garden, it seemed even being a member of the professional law enforcement group made up of teachers was not enough for them to trust a male. Kamijou began to understand just how much of an oddity it was for him to be here.

“You don’t seem like that at all. It’s more like you heard about this from someone else,” he pointed out.

“Fwa ha ha ha ha! Well, yes. There are two different types of students here: those that leave the School Garden and those that don’t. And do I really look like a pure girl who knows nothing of the outside world?”

“You’re controlling this bobbed hair girl, so I have no idea what you look like.”

Then again…

The School Garden likely had a lot of security cameras, but if he was dressed in an Anti-Skill uniform, he would have no problems walking through the streets.

(Wait. But she just said even real Anti-Skill members aren't allowed here. Something isn't adding up…)

Kamijou looked confused and was about to ask the bobbed hair girl about it, but something stopped him.

Without hesitation, the bobbed hair girl began removing the top of her sailor uniform.

Kamijou made a splendid leap behind the pile of cardboard boxes as if he was evading a barrage of bullets.

"You idiot!! Did you forget you're borrowing this girl's body!?"

"Oh? But I don't mind at all."

"Of course you don't! You're controlling someone else!! Don't you feel any guilt!? Even if I tried to apologize, she can't hear me!!"

"It is true that this bust size ability is rather disappointing."

While still hiding behind the cardboard boxes, Kamijou put on the black bulletproof and stabproof armor. He peered out when he heard a voice saying "You can come out now!", but the girl was still wearing nothing but her underwear. Kamijou silently hid right back behind the boxes and slammed his forehead against the floor. This made a loud noise, but it had no real meaning.

"…There is no way in hell you are going to have a pleasant death."

"I can't think of any death that would be pleasant☆"

The bobbed hair girl made another sideways peace sign next to her eye before starting toward the back entrance.

Kamijou frantically stopped her.

"Wait a second. You said even real male Anti-Skill members aren't allowed in here, right? Won't I cause a commotion even with this disguise?"

"Don't worry, don't worry. Just leave it to me."

"Y-you're kidding, right!? I have no idea what's going on anymore! You're not just having fun with this, are you!?"

"Oraaahhh!!" shouted the bobbed hair girl as she shoved Kamijou out the door.

As expected, he ran across several energetic girls about three seconds after finding himself outside. One girl was carrying that thing used in lacrosse (he did not know what it was called), one was carrying that monstrous trumpet like instrument used by wind instrument clubs (he did not know what it was called), and one was carrying a morning star (…!?). Their faces grew pale when they saw him and they were clearly about to scream.

“Gya-…!?”

But the bobbed hair girl shouted loud enough to drown them out.

“What are you girls doing here!?”

“Huh? Eh?”

“Haven’t you heard that a suspicious boy has entered the School Garden!? You need to evacuate to a building somewhere! Hurry!!”

“Um, uh… Why is that gentleman in the School Garden?”

“That is just how urgent the situation is. They had to call in backup on a large enough scale that we couldn’t worry about gender. By the way, I was called in to help as a Judgment member. Do you know what my power is?”

They of course did not.

As the girls (and Kamijou) stared blankly at her, the bobbed hair girl pointed her thumb toward her chest.

“I have a water control power that has been confirmed effective as a means of emergency birth control.”

“Geh!?”

“This intruder is a member of a natural talent cult that focuses on genetics. I hope I do not need to explain why a beast like that would have snuck into this girls-only area. Hurry! If you do not want to need my ability, you have to go hide now! Email your friends, too! Make sure everyone knows! Do not come out of hiding until we send an email explaining the situation. Do you understand!?”

The girls ran off as quickly as they could.

And then Kamijou collapsed onto his knees.

“Why are you increasing my supposed list of crimes!?”

“All I had to do was make sure they knew this is an emergency where their common knowledge does not apply. In a small world like this, rumors spread very quickly. The School Garden can be filled with sensational emails within minutes. If all of those emails say the same thing, even the

adults should accept it." The bobbed hair girl grinned. "And did you notice something else? Those girls realized you were a guy, but they did not realize you are the rumored intruder."

"…Huh?"

Now that she mentioned it, he noticed it too.

If they were pursuing the criminal based on something they had heard from "a friend of a friend", they might very well have never seen his face. However, a high school boy walking around in an Anti-Skill uniform should have been out of place enough that they would suspect him. And yet they had not.

"They never even looked at your face. They may have been keeping their peace of mind by not looking you in the eye and keeping their mind off of you."

"What?"

"Those pure high-class girls are not used to seeing guys, so they were intentionally ignoring you. They probably assumed you were an adult because you were wearing that Anti-Skill uniform. They may have been judging you by your clothes more than your face"

Once again, he realized she was right.

The bobbed hair girl had been the one to give a lot of false decoy information because the one dressed in the Anti-Skill uniform would be the first one they would suspect.

Kamijou was unsure how much they could deceive the adults monitoring the area with security cameras, but they might actually overlook it once they saw the decoy emails spreading among the girls and saw the girls who had accepted the explanation in the grainy security camera footage.

"Okay. The girls I asked to gather the maps are here, so it is time for our next action."

The Anti-Skill uniform was a fully functional replica. Even if the bulletproofing and stabproofing had been kept as lightweight as possible, it was still quite heavy. And the plates embedded in it made it hard to move in. However, it was well worth it since it allowed him to walk around without worrying about hiding.

"Okay, okay, okay. I've gathered the maps of the five schools. If I connect here to here like this…done. Their secrecy ability and hiding ability mean nothing now. I have a full patched-together map of the School Garden☆"

"…That's one more thing to add to my list of crimes."

"If they find out, you'll probably never be allowed to leave. Or they might rip out the corresponding brain cells."

She smoothly made that horrifying comment.

Kamijou desperately hoped it was only the black humor of a high-class girl's school.

"I don't actually know what the Altar of the Wisdom King looks like. It should be some Japanese-style container in which a fire can be made. Where could someone leave an antique like that without raising suspicion?"

"Hmm. If it can be as small as a censer, it could be in a tea ceremony clubroom, a flower arrangement clubroom, or in someone's personal possessions. It might even be in one of the student dorms within the School Garden."

"If it is, we'll never find it. We only have 80 minutes left. How many people can you use inside the School Garden?"

"Just barely reaching triple digits. But I can't completely control all of them at once. I can program them to automatically carry out simple commands, but I can only control 10 people at once with this level of skillful ability."

However, that still meant she could accurately control 10 people at once.

The ability to constantly switch between the different people like that reminded Kamijou this was a Level 5.

"After the 50 minute mark, you need to get everyone out of the School Garden. Tell them I set up a nuke in here if you need to!"

"That is quite a tempting suggestion, but I have an idea with a bit more peaceful ability." The bobbed hair girl gave a sticky grin. "The School Garden has a total of eight gates. Items can be brought in through five of those. However, if someone was bringing in a piece of artwork or an antique, it would have received a special inspection. And there would be a record of this."

"Why would they do that?"

"Recently, some idiot tried to sneak out a chip loaded with classified information hidden in an impressionist painting. The use of nondestructive examination methods such as magnetism and X-rays has been increased since then. I suggest we check the inspection records for the gates."

Part 7

Kamijou started by using the composite map created from the gathered maps to locate the closest luggage entry gate. The bobbed hair girl had no obligation to stay with him now that he had a safe means of moving around, but she stayed with him for some reason.

A rectangular station surrounded by thick walls was located next to the giant gate. The inspection personnel likely worked inside.

"By the way, can you control them?"

"This girl's brain cannot use my powers."

She could not use her brainwashing.

That meant the high school boy dressed in an Anti-Skill uniform and the bobbed hair girl needed to find a way into the station. Kamijou saw no way they could get in without anyone noticing.

"Okay, let's use the usual trick☆"

"I don't want to think of that as being 'usual'!!"

The bobbed hair girl dragged Kamijou up to the station door and then knocked violently on it. A female inspector came out and the bobbed hair girl shouted with a voice as sharp as a knife.

"What took you so long!?"

"What…eh? Wait a second. Who are you two?"

Her tone strengthened, but it may have been due to her unease. Inspectors were not the same as professional Anti-Skill members. The bobbed hair girl pulled something out of her pocket and tossed it at the inspector's face.

It was a pair of panties.

"We've already had several victims!! Do you really think this is any time to sit around asking questions!?"

"Wh-what…?"

"I'm sure you've heard that a suspicious boy snuck in here while packed in a box, but don't tell me you really thought it was just the one! Incidents are cropping up all over the School Garden. We have confirmed somewhere between 30 and 40 people have snuck in. If we don't find out how they snuck in through this gate, who knows how many girls will be impregnated!!"

"Are you serious?"

“Hurry! You need to hurry! Pull up all the data you have so we can find when and where they snuck in! Hurry!!”

The bobbed hair girl half forced her way into the station while pushing the inspector. As Kamijou followed, he had a smile on his face but was crying in his heart.

“(Ah, manipulating those arrogant adults gives me such pleasure ability. I absolutely love it☆)”

“(Is it just me or are all the false accusations you’re pushing onto me absolutely horrible!? And has this girl not been wearing any panties since we changed!?)”

As the crowd of inspectors held their heads in their hands and fought in front of the screen, the bobbed hair girl and Kamijou peered in from behind to catch a glimpse of the inspection records.

“Damn, there’s just too much data! Do you have any information we can use to narrow down our search!?”

Kamijou thought a bit after hearing that inspector’s question.

(I was thrown in here 50 minutes ago. I don’t know when the Altar of the Wisdom King was brought in, but there couldn’t have been too much of a lag. With this much security, the magician wouldn’t want to stay here any longer than necessary.)

“The first suspicious person was spotted 24 hours ago. Try to focus your search on objects that were registered as pure Japanese antiques.”

“Okay, okay, okay… Found something. Is it this!? Would you say this is suspicious!?”

The inspector urged him to look at the screen, but a high school boy could hardly decipher that list of numbers and item names.

However, the bobbed hair girl next to him said, “Shiraha Social Support Club.”

“What?”

“It is an unofficial salon led by students. It has about 20 members. Officially, it is an independent archery training group, but the members’ actual goal is to create connections with large corporations mainly from the financial world. If I recall, the leader loves kimonos and wall scrolls.”

Some of the terms mixed in there had Kamijou doubting this was a middle school girl speaking, but it may have been that he was the odd one out.

The inspector tapped on the screen and asked, “What should we do? Call in reinforcements and surround the place?”

“We will handle it.”

The bobbed hair girl waved her hand while pulling Kamijou out of the station by the hand.

The girl led him to the building in question.

The Shiraha Social Support Club had rented out an entire small building along the European-style street. It looked like a bank, but it was protected by a door even sturdier than a bank’s.

Girls would occasionally pass through the door. When they did, they held up some kind of card, but it was unclear what sort of system it used.

“So the Altar of the Wisdom King is in there,” muttered Kamijou. “Any idea how to get in?”

“As I already explained, I cannot use my powers with this girl’s brain. That means it is impossible to control someone’s mind to get in. And my powers do not work on anything electrical anyway.”

“I know someone who’s good with that kind of thing, but…”

Kamijou brought his head into his hands.

He had not seen Misaka Mikoto since their brief chase scene on the School Garden rooftops. If he tried to explain everything from the beginning after that, the time limit for the Altar of the Wisdom King would arrive before anything got done.

Which meant…

“It looks like we need to steal one of those authorization cards.”

“How about you beat one of the girls up and steal it?”

“Girl, it may be way too late already, but I want to avoid any decisions that will earn me a bullet to the head.”

The bobbed hair girl tilted her head with a look that said, “Then what can we do?”

Kamijou replied, “What combination of food and drink wouldn’t stand out for someone wearing an Anti-Skill uniform?”

“Anpan and milk.”

“Do you know where we can buy that in this land of high-class girls?”

Part 8

What they had to do was simple in and of itself.

“What I’m afraid of are ticks. Y’know, those blood-sucking bugs. They act like tiny little droppers of blood and spread disease.”

“Insecticide is used here weekly. Although I suppose that might actually affect your health ability too.”

They started by choosing a target. They staked out the area around the Shiraha Social Support Club and spotted one of the girls going in and out of the building. After that, they waited in a position a short distance away from the building. They had to wait for the proper timing.

“If a tick won’t go near a house, doesn’t that mean it is like a sick house? It has to be full of chemicals.”

“But you don’t want a house full of ticks either, do you? In fact, that would be much worse.”

Kamijou and the bobbed hair girl held freshly-baked and delicious-smelling anpan and a bottle of oddly deep-colored milk. The food and drink were much more elegant than what Kamijou had been imagining.

“That has the same question ability as asking someone whether they want to kill themself or be killed by someone else.”

“If I had to choose, I’d scrub everything clean with antibacterial cleaning supplies even if it might kill m-…wah!?”

Kamijou intentionally stepped out just when the target girl was walking past. He bumped into her and dumped the bottle of milk over the girl’s head.

“Gyah!? Eh? What? You’re kidding! Milk!? Really!?”

“Oh, sorry, sorry! Quick, take that off. If you don’t get the milk off, the smell won’t come out!!”

Kamijou politely took the girl’s blazer, but his false smile froze over when he stuck his hand in the inner pocket.

He could not feel a wallet or card inside.

“…Um, is something the matter?”

“Uh…no. I just need to make extra sure I get any stains out, so…”

“?”

It was all over if his poor attempts at buying time made her grow suspicious.

Kamijou had no choice but to return the girl's blazer…but then he felt something hard against his index finger.

It seemed it had a pocket he had not checked.

"What is it?"

"Eh? Oh, um…"

"I certainly hope you did not intentionally dump that milk on me so you could steal my wallet like some New Yorker pickpocket. That isn't what this is, right!?"

"N-no! Of course not!!"

"And there was no obscene meaning behind dumping unnecessarily thick milk in my hair, was there?"

"If that's what came to your mind, there is something wrong with you!!"

Kamijou instinctually spread his arms in a sign of nonresistance.

It took him a second to realize the hard feeling was gone form his index finger and that the blazer was no longer in his hand. But by then it was too late. It would be too unnatural to grab the girl's blazer out of her hands now.

Meanwhile, the girl checked on her wallet in the inner pocket.

"Well, I suppose Anti-Skill has not fallen that far."

The bobbed hair girl waved a hand from behind the relieved target. She held a card between her index and middle fingers.

(How did she do that!?)

Kamijou's eyes opened wide in shock and the bobbed hair girl used her other hand to point at the target's skirt.

The target did not notice this at all.

"Please be more careful. In fact, I will charge you if the smell does not come out!!"

"I-if you have a complaint, just contact the teaching department…" said Kamijou before walking away.

The bobbed hair girl pressed the card into his hands.

"Here you go, honey."

"Stop helping me commit crimes and then acting like I'm taking advantage of you."

“Calm down. If you hadn’t acted as the decoy there, I could not have stolen it so easily.”

“The next time you don’t tell me something beforehand, I’m going to start taking countermeasures against it.”

Kamijou and the bobbed hair girl headed for the Shiraha Social Support Club building. They stuck the card in the reader and the thick door of tempered glass unlocked.

From the outside, it looked like an old bank lobby inside, but once the door opened, they found a Japanese-style room with tatami mats and paper sliding doors. Kamijou was confused by the sudden change of scenery.

“It’s part of the scenery preservation. It’s the same as a hologram. Tiny indentations and protrusions are made on the glass like on a CD to alter the condition ability of the light to make a Japanese-style room look like a Western-style lobby.”

No one was inside.

There might be people on other floors, but Kamijou hoped there were not.

“The Altar of the Wisdom King,” muttered Kamijou as he looked around the room. “Where is it? It should be in this building. Umezaki Yuuga brought it here! It’s a tool that can hold the fire for a Homa altar. If I only knew where it was, I could destroy it with my right hand!!”

He searched.

And searched.

And searched.

However, he found nothing that could be it. Was it on another floor? Heading upstairs would increase the possibility of running into someone from the Shiraha Social Support Club, but this was no time to hesitate. Kamijou looked over at the wooden staircase, but then the bobbed hair girl suddenly spoke.

“Um, this is a simple question, but does your intuition ability sense any sign of finding this object?”

“I have to find it here! Destroying it is easy, but if nothing is done before the time limit, the School Garden will be completely destroyed. I have to keep that from happening!!”

“Are you sure?”

The bobbed hair girl continued to raise more doubts.

Kamijou assumed she was suggesting Umezaki had already arrived and taken the item elsewhere. But she actually said something he did not expect.

"There is no sign of this thing and you cannot find a single clue to its existence. …If I were you, I would begin to doubt the accuracy ability of the information I had been given. Or is that a personal issue due to my mental esper power?"

"…"

Kamijou started to feel something unpleasant roiling in his stomach.

(That's right.)

When it came down to it, his information was nothing more than what Tsuchimikado Motoharu, a single person, had told him. He did not know how the boy had gotten him through the School Garden's security, but Tsuchimikado had completely disappeared after shipping Kamijou in and calling him once for that explanation.

(I've been thrown into ridiculous battlefields by Tsuchimikado before, but they never had such a short time limit. …It's almost as if he never intended me to succeed in the first place. *Tsuchimikado is always so thoroughly prepared,* so this just wasn't like him.)

But what did that mean?

Kamijou stopped thinking at that point. It had a lot to do with him not wanting to think about it, but he also had too little information to make any real judgment.

And then…

He spotted something outside the wall of windows facing out of that Japanese-style room. It must have been made like a one-way mirror because the image coming in did not seem to be altered. An airship was flying above the School Garden. It had a large screen on the side which was showing Academy City's headlines.

It currently showed the following:

"Breaking news of a fire in District 7. One room of a student dorm was partially destroyed in the fire. The single confirmed fatality was the room's resident, Tsuchimikado Maika-san. An investigation has begun to determine whether this was arson or an accident."

Kamijou's thoughts went completely blank.

The words scrolling by on that giant screen were simply so inhuman that Kamijou had difficulty connecting what they said to the person he pictured in his head.

She was dead?

That girl who always wore a maid uniform and sat seiza-style on a cleaning robot was dead?

And…

How were Tsuchimikado Motoharu's actions related to this incident?

"What is…going on…?" muttered Kamijou blankly.

Whether she knew what he was thinking or not, the bobbed hair girl spoke in that alluring intonation that did not match her soprano voice.

"What I am suggesting is that someone might have made up a reason to keep you locked up in School Garden like a cage while they did something else in Academy City."

Part 9

The sirens of fire trucks blared

Rows of similar buildings lined District 7. One room in one of those buildings had been burned black and then flooded with water.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu operated his cell phone in the parking lot of a convenience store across from the building. Instead of his usual outfit, he had his hair dyed brown and wore a chic jacket. A truck passed right by him and covered him in exhaust, but the boy did not move at all.

His cell phone's small screen displayed a news site.

He focused on one of several headlines.

"A fire in a District 7 student dorm. One student dead."

It was a simple line of text.

The text had been made into a link that would likely lead to a page with more details, but that would be no more than 1000 characters.

However…

It finally felt real to Tsuchimikado Motoharu when he saw it posted on that news site.

It was as if it finally hit home that she was dead.

He felt something silently well up within his chest. By the time it began noisily simmering and producing a strange heat, he could no longer control it. Once the subjective symptoms showed themselves, it was like an extremely advanced cancer. How could this have happened? What had he done wrong? He could not stop himself from thinking those things. And in his current state, Tsuchimikado had no intention of trying to suppress it.

His expression did not change.

He did not bare his teeth like a beast nor did he let out a roar that would rip apart his lungs. However, this did not mean he felt no emotion. Tsuchimikado Motoharu knew that he needed to suppress any meaningless signs of emotion when failure was absolutely not an option. The path to success only opened when he feigned calm, acted harmless, and fooled everyone. The more difficult that was to do, the more of himself he had to stifle.

And so he forced it all down.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu forced it down while feeling deep scorn for the fact that he had to do so.

And…

Tsuchimikado Motoharu moved his lips just once. It was as if the words had slipped out rather than an intentional announcement.

He said, “It’s time to get revenge.”

He no longer had any collar or chains holding him back.

Those who had removed them needed to learn what exactly that meant.

Between the Lines 1

Academy City’s aerospace facilities were concentrated in District 23, so it of course functioned as the city’s main entrance from the air. Several sets of footsteps caused quite a commotion in the lobby of an international airport there.

One of them belonged to Yomikawa Aiho, an official member of Anti-Skill. Her jurisdiction was District 7, but her skill must have been widely known because she was often called in for help with major incidents in other districts.

“Dr. Matsusada?”

“Yes, that authority in fluid mechanics that even children have heard of. He wrote the best seller ‘The Future of Next-Generation Processors using Viscosity and Density’.”

For some reason, the flight attendant showing her the way almost seemed to be advertising for the man.

Yomikawa wondered why such a dry technical book would be so popular with children, but that may have been yet another special characteristic of Academy City.

There was something else she needed to focus on now.

For example, the other Anti-Skill member walking next to her.

Yomikawa glanced over with a look of extreme displeasure.

“Oh, c’mon. Why did they let someone like you out?”

“Long time no see, Aiho-chi. It’s your old friend, Stephanie Gorgeouspalace. I didn’t buy you a souvenir, but I hope you can forgive me.”

“I heard you fled Academy City, became a mercenary, and then came back as a terrorist.”

“That had a lot to do with the city’s dark side, so good job finding all that out. But I’m not back on the job because I want to be. They must not have wanted to waste anyone they can use. I’ve also heard Sunazara-san is lending his sniping experience to others via some electronic equipment despite still being in a coma. You didn’t lose a bunch of the adults during World War III, did you?”

Sending Yomikawa from her District 7 jurisdiction to District 23 was irregular enough. But now Stephanie had been temporarily released from her cell. It sounded nice to call it the creation of a cruel dream team, but it basically meant this problem had been deemed just that dangerous.

Yomikawa scratched lightly at her head with one hand.

“I guess this is no time to worry about this. You’re not too rusty to trust in a fight, are you?”

“Heh heh. Just leave it to me. Tah dah!! Take a look at this week’s special weapon!!”

As she spoke, Stephanie opened the latches of the two musical instrument cases hanging down from her hands. She produced giant masses of metal over 2 meters long from within. Each one did not have just a single barrel. Instead, three were bound together in a ring. Instead of a trigger pulled with the index finger, they had a button for the thumb with a safety cover over it.

When Yomikawa saw the ridiculous weapons, she brought her head into her hands.

“Please just leave.”

“Eh? Why? Why?”

“I can’t trust you!! You have to be completely insane to use two Gatling guns that need to be staked into the ground to use! You can’t possibly aim those things!!”

“They have legs, so you don’t need to worry about that. Can’t you see the joints on the bipods? They use robot technology, so they absorb all of the recoil and I can aim them in any direction just by twisting my wrist slightly.”

“If they have legs, why don’t you control them remotely?”

“Just calm down. You won’t be saying that for long. I’ll be firing at extreme close quarters with 20mm weapons. Each of these can fire 4000 rounds a minute. Once you see it in action, I’m sure you’ll love it.”

“You make it sound like a fireworks show…”

Two security robots following behind Stephanie were attached to the Gatling guns with thick belts. They were likely disguised self-propelled magazines. Yomikawa followed Stephanie through the airport while Stephanie dragged along the giant drum-shaped magazines that were connected to the guns like a vacuum cleaner.

An airport worker who was speaking with some other Anti-Skill members noticed Yomikawa and approached her.

“Dr. Matsusada is in that…business cargo collection lane. We confirmed it in the camera records, but he has shown no sign of leaving from any of the exits.”

“Is it locked?”

“Every entrance was locked since before he fled inside. That means the electronic locks were of no use. We have no idea what is going on.”

“Hee hee. Well, that is his field of expertise. Given his skill, maybe we should question the camera footage as well.” Stephanie cut in from the side. “But would such a brilliant doctor really overlook such a simple fact? Whether you are an adult or a child, you cannot go for an overseas trip without a security check and some nanodevices.”

“I don’t want to hear that from someone who ran off.”

“I’m just saying he needed to make the proper preparations.”

“So what do you think?”

“Maybe he was trying to hide in the cargo to escape without buying a ticket.”

“Or he is trying to make us think that so he can use the confusion to escape via some other route.”

The airport worker handed Yomikawa something like a USB memory stick.

“It normally uses a palm print, but this is the master key. You use this by opening the authorization panel with a screwdriver and-…”

“He’ll have rewritten the data for the lock,” said Stephanie as lightheartedly as if she was singing a song she did not know the words to.

As she did, she unhesitatingly aimed her Gatling guns at the locked door.

An explosive noise rang out.

After only a few seconds, both the metal door and the wall were filled with as many holes as a sponge. The door did not collapse in the opposite direction. Before it could, something exploded and shockwaves and orange flames scattered in every direction.

Yomikawa immediately jumped to the ground, covering the airport worker with her body. She then shouted loud enough to be heard over the din.

“Stephanie! You goddamn idiot!!”

“What? That last explosion wasn’t me. Some kind of clay must have been stuck on the door. It’s a good thing we didn’t try the master key.”

With that casual comment, Stephanie walked toward the giant hole where it was impossible to tell what had originally been the door and what had originally been the wall. If Stephanie was left to her own devices, the entire airport could easily end up destroyed, so Yomikawa frantically ran after her.

When Stephanie stepped into the room beyond, she looked around and let out a whistle. The area was as large as a gym, but it had conveyer belts running every which way, giving it a cramped feeling. And on top of that, Stephanie’s storm of bullets had clearly made their way inside because several of the conveyer belts had burst apart or crumbled.

(Damn her. She intentionally gave away her position!)

At first glance, it had seemed Stephanie had whistled without thinking, but it had likely been intentional. She was an oddity who used light machine guns, semi-auto sniper rifles, and other difficult to handle guns in the type of extreme close quarters gunfights seen in movies. She must have felt it was best to quickly determine the enemy’s location even if it gave them a chance to attack first.

But…

That analysis of the woman’s actions had been too naïve.

Stephanie Gorgeouspalace aimed her two Gatling guns in completely different directions in that obstacle-filled cargo lane. Yomikawa did not even have time to call out.

An explosive noise rang out.

A large number of bullets tore through the sturdy conveyer belts like they were made of paper and reached the opposite wall. Stephanie continued to fire bullets in short bursts here and there. This continued until Yomikawa grabbed Stephanie by the collar.

“Yes, what is it?”

“Do you have any idea what you are doing!?”

“Cutting off the wiring to all of the exits. This man may be an expert programmer, but the deadbolts will never open if there is no power reaching them. This is the best way to trap him inside.”

“Listen. Our objective is to capture Dr. Matsusada who is trying to escape Academy City, not to kill him! If those 20mm bullets of yours so much as graze that old man, his fat guts will be splattered on the wall!! You’re shooting those things at a rate of 4000 a minute! Do understand what that means!?”

“If he was someone who would die from this, I would not have been called in from my cell.”

At that point, they heard a small noise.

It was not the sound of the smashed wreckage of a conveyer belt falling to the floor. The sound was oozing with the will of a human. Yomikawa let go of Stephanie’s collar and focused in the direction of the sound. A small old man poked his head out from behind some rubble with his hands raised.

“Checkmate, old man. You aren’t being shot on sight because Academy City still has a conscience. But that conscience does have its limits.”

“…You don’t understand.”

Dr. Matsusada was trembling with his hands still raised.

The sweat on his face was due to fear, but he did not seem worried about the heavy firepower Stephanie held. He was afraid of something that was located elsewhere.

“You people understand nothing! The only way to escape its effects is to leave the city!! How can you be so carefree? The changes have already begun!! No, wait. Have you already been taken in by it…?”

“Dr. Matsusada? What are you talking about?”

“I didn’t mean to create something like that,” said Dr. Matsusada with an expression of anguish as if he was clenching his back teeth.

No, he really was clenching them. And it was too late by the time they understood what that meant.

“I-I! I!! I know more than anyone just how frightening the ‘child’ I created is! How frightening a world without heroes is! Gh..gbh! I…”

“Ah! He-…!!”

By the time Stephanie frantically cried out, Dr. Matsusada had already collapsed to the ground.

Yomikawa quickly ran over, but the small old man's eyes were already wandering aimlessly.

They were slowly wandering.

"He had something in his back teeth…"

"cp-191. A hibernation drug developed for a manned Mars investigation project that never got anywhere."

"He isn't going to wake up no matter what we do for three months. I will send for an esper with a mind-related power just in case."

"The signal is too flat, so I doubt anything will be able to shake him into consciousness. Nor can any information be taken from his brain."

In that case…

Yomikawa and Stephanie exchanged a truly annoyed glance.

Yomikawa spoke what they were both thinking.

"What research results had Dr. Matsusada so afraid?"

Chapter 2: The Wandering Beast and Outside the Cage. *Dead_Girl.*

Part 1

If he was being perfectly honest, he could not say it had not irritated him.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu had been a magician who had earned the title of an Onmyou expert at a very young age. Officially, magic was known as a field for those without talent to overcome those with talent. For that reason, he did not like the term, but “genius” did fit him quite well. That was how skilled he was.

And then he had been given the mission to sneak into Academy City.

He was to sneak in as a student, so he would need to undergo the psychic powers development of the science side. One did not even need to read the records on the accident involving Sherry Cromwell and Ellis Warrior to know the simple fact that espers could not use magic.

Simply put, the Anglican Church had asked him to abandon magic.

He had of course wondered why he had been chosen and resented the higher ups for choosing him. If it had simply been a means of taking care of someone the higher ups felt was a bit too skilled, he would have simply laughed and left the organization. What was not funny was the fact that he truly had been the best suited person for the undercover mission.

And if Tsuchimikado Motoharu had not accepted that, the balance between magic and science would have collapsed.

Something had been advancing below the surface that had forced them to make that judgment.

“If you are to fake your identity as a student, you must have all the relationships that come with it.”

The one who had shrugged and told him that had likely been Bishu.

“In other words, a family.”

Tsuchimikado Motoharu, Tsuchimikado Bishu, and Tsuchimikado Touzu.

The last two were not to sneak into Academy City. They merely took on those names to play the role of his family outside the city. But they had been forced to abandon their family names of Urabe and Ashiya, so it could not have been an enjoyable task for them.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu had lightly clicked his tongue and replied, “This fake identity will be seen through in half a day.”

“Then how about we mix some truth in with the lies?” Bishu had immediately replied. The response had seemed arbitrary on the surface, but she had of course prepared everything in advance. “After you arrive in Japan, go around to different orphanages. Choose a…young girl to add to the family. This will be a girl who truly knows nothing of magic or science. Her existence will confuse the analysts in Academy City’s intelligence department. They may think you might be an enemy, but they will find it too irrational for an enemy to do this.”

It had not been an enjoyable suggestion.

He was being ordered to bring an innocent girl into the picture.

“That may help, but it still won’t last longer than 3 days. I don’t see the point.”

“Three days is long enough for the entire world to change,” Bishu had said. “Sneak into that city of science and show some results before their intelligence department catches up to you. If you are able to become indispensable to them, you might be able to ‘stick’ when they try to wash you away.”

That had been the circumstances surrounding it.

It had been a family that was held together by lies and contained no hint of love.

The reason Tsuchimikado Motoharu had chosen that girl to join the family had been quite simple: her circumstances made it easy to fake her official records. That was all there had been to it.

And so…

Tsuchimikado Motoharu had said the following to that girl while on the way to Academy City with her:

“If you do not question the circumstances you find yourself in, I will give you anything you want.”

That had been the extent of the contract between them.

It had been his way of apologizing in advance for an expert like him getting an amateur like her involved.

That girl of course had not understood the situation, so she had tilted her head in confusion.

“You’ll do anything for me?”

“Within certain limits.”

“But...” That girl had smiled as she continued to speak truly smoothly. “If I have a ticket like that, I should give it to someone who actually needs it.”

“…”

He had not expected that response.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu had been abandoning everything about himself as a magician. And that response had been enough to softly stimulate something that had just barely begun to appear within him.

Part 2

Diazinon Insecticide - Toxic.

Those words were printed in large text on the side of a tanker truck. The driver’s side door opened and Fugan Ryuuzou stepped out onto the asphalt. He inserted bill after bill into a drink vending machine on the sidewalk and pressed the green tea button repeatedly. He had a small refrigerator inside the truck similar to a hotel or hospital room, but the drinks inside had run out.

A light electronic tone rang from the pocket of his work uniform.

He used different tones to distinguish between business and private and this was the business one. He pulled out his cell phone with a grimace. Even more wrinkles covered his face when he saw an even more ridiculous order than he had expected.

Nothing was blatantly spelled out in the email, but a list of unrealistic “products” was hidden beneath the surface if one saw through each of the metaphors and codes.

“An auto-loading mortar? What are they thinking? Are they planning to load it into a disaster relief robot to cause some kind of disturbance?”

Fugan was not a weapons seller.

He was nothing more than a designer. Whether it was a safe device or a dangerous one, he would draw up the plans for whatever his clients asked for and send those plans to them over the internet. Thanks to private video services becoming so plentiful lately, net rentals with excellent copy guarding and timed file deletion had become easy. He had no trouble passing the necessary data to the client while also preventing the data from spreading uncontrollably.

As he walked toward the tanker truck holding a large number of plastic bottles, Fugan thought about whether he should accept this job or not. His initial opinion was 8 to 2 opposed to the idea. With this sort of job, there was no established price, but the amount suggested was still a problem. But not because it was too low. It was too high. This was likely either a rookie who knew nothing of the business or an Anti-Skill sting operation.

(Well, first impressions are important. I just finished a major job, so I don't need to take any risks. In this field, you will never survive if you can't trust your own nose.)

As he thought, he opened the driver's side door and leaned inside to drop the drink bottles on the seat.

And then…

Someone kicked the door closed with Fugan Ryuuzou caught in the middle.

"Bh…gh!?"

Fugan's entire body convulsed as if he was being bitten into by a dinosaur. He felt so much pain he was amazed he was not coughing up blood. He might have broken some ribs, but the attacker did not care. Fugan's arms were brought behind him and handcuffed. The attacker grabbed his clothes, spun him around 180 degrees, and slammed his back up against the side of the driver's seat.

The attacker was a boy who had thin-lensed glasses and short hair dyed brown.

He was Tsuchimikado Motoharu.

"…Pant…pant… Why?"

"Why do you think?" said Tsuchimikado in a low voice. "Why do you think a weapons seller like you is being attacked now?"

"…"

For an instant, the attacker glanced somewhere else. Fugan wanted as much information as he could, so he desperately followed the boy's gaze while the boy still held his collar. Inside the half-open truck door was the small screen of the car navigation system. It had 1seg functionality and could receive the news.

Fugan could only think of one possible connection.

The recent news of a fire that had been *disguised as* a completely normal incident.

“Wait! Please wait! I had nothing to do with that. I only sold the designs. This is how I make my way through the underside of this city without dirtying my own hands. Do you really think I would do something to anger you!?”

“Are you saying you don’t know where the weapon you sold the plans to was manufactured or who did it?”

Tsuchimikado gave a small smile.

However, his eyes were not smiling.

“Liar.”

“…”

“You’re afraid of these dangerous weapons plans spreading uncontrollably, so you use the net rental format. I doubt someone like that would stop tracking things after the sale. You monitor them. You check to make sure what you created is only used within the scope of their request.”

“I-I don’t do that. You’re just speculating. What proof of this do you-…”

Fugan Ryuuzou trailed off.

This was because Tsuchimikado had suddenly let go of his collar. Fugan fell into a sitting position and coughed.

And then he saw it.

That boy in the chic jacket was pulling out a toolbox from the floor of the passenger seat.

“W-wait…”

“Did you think this was a police interrogation room where you would be served katsudon? Or were you expecting a scene of me presenting evidence sealed in plastic bags?”

“Wait!! Why are you lining up wrenches and crowbars on the street!?”

“Then again, recording things like they do in an interrogation room isn’t a bad idea. Or maybe a live broadcast would be better. I may not look it, but I know how to put on a blue-fin tuna dissection show. I can even show you your beating heart while you are still breathing. Do you know how hard it is to bring out the heart without using anesthesia?”

“…!!!???”

Fugan almost cried out in fear, but he managed to cover his mouth with one hand. Tsuchimikado had started by breaking his pinky finger.

“Bbh…Bbah!! I-I get it…wait, stop!!”

Next came his ring finger.

And then Tsuchimikado reached for the man's plump middle finger.

"Stop!! Stop! I-I'll talk…!!"

In truth, Tsuchimikado did not have time to slowly torture the man. If an unrelated person came along and called Anti-Skill, it was all over. And a rotten weapons seller who dealt with the dark side would never break in just a few minutes if all Tsuchimikado did was punch and kick him.

Not all pain was equal.

Some was worth much more than others.

How much fear could be produced with a single act of violence? That was where the preparations became important. It was not just in the medieval witch hunts that experts would line up cruel collection of overly musty tools with ominous stains still on them. Even if those tools were never used, they could still be quite effective.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu was not only a member of the science side as a resident of Academy City.

He was also a member of the magic side as an expert from the Anglican Church which specialized in inquisitions.

"I'll talk!! I'll talk!! What do you want to know first!?"

As Fugan's trembling almost reached the point of being convulsions, Tsuchimikado grabbed his collar once more and slammed his back against the side of the tanker truck.

He slowly spoke in the man's ear.

"If someone sees us and interrupts this, I will kill you. So make sure you tell me everything before that happens, okay?"

"…I-I fucked up big time," weakly spat out Fugan. "It was wrong of me to hold some strange sense of justice despite being so deep in this world. I caught a glimpse of something I should not have seen."

"What exactly was it?"

"Wait…" Fugan Ryuuzou shook his head while Tsuchimikado still held his collar. "Please, please. I know this is someone dangerous. I don't want to make an enemy of them. I'm already on the edge of a cliff here! I think what happened to your friend was unfortunate, but that doesn't mean I'm ready to die with you!!"

"…"

“I wasn’t able to track them! I’ve been involved in a lot of dangerous incidents, but this is the first time I’ve completely lost the trail. I don’t know who exactly this is, but I know they’re dangerous. This was a sign that I shouldn’t investigate any further. I don’t want a monster like that turning their focus on me! Please believe me! I really don’t know anything more!!”

“I see. Fine then.”

“What are you-…?” started Fugan before catching on.

After letting go of the man’s collar, Tsuchimikado Motoharu pulled out Fugan’s business phone and used his thumb to operate it.

“I hear you’re one of the top weapons sellers in the city. You must make a lot of money.”

“I’m a general designer. It just so happens that most of the requests I get are for weapons.”

“This was clever of you.” Tsuchimikado used a fist to bang on the tank loaded on the back of the large vehicle. “Undiluted toxic insecticide. With that kind of warning, Anti-Skill isn’t going to open it up and check inside even if you’re pulled over at a checkpoint or for questioning. And even if they crack it open, they’ll back off when the smell hits them. No one will try to check further inside. And no thief is going to steal such an obvious truck. Gold bars are heavy, so a weapons seller who doesn’t trust the defenses of internet banks needs a giant vault on wheels to carry around his earnings.”

With that casual comment, Tsuchimikado tossed the cell phone back toward Fugan. The man’s arms were handcuffed behind him, so he could not catch it. However, when it bounced off his chest and landed on the asphalt with the screen up, his eyes opened wide.

“I announced your defeat and revealed the secret of your vault. The hyenas should arrive in 5 to 10 minutes.”

“Ah…ah…”

“If you won’t give me the information I need, I’ll try someone else. This is a total of 7 billion yen, after all. I’m sure someone important will be mixed in with the hyenas. I’ll pursue them.”

“Ah…Aaaahhhhh!!
Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

Fugan cried out and slammed his heel against the ground.

But before the sneak attack gimmick hidden in his shoe could show itself, Tsuchimikado grabbed his collar and threw him onto the sidewalk.

“Bh…bgh…!?”

“I’m not going to kill you here. Killing you would be easier, but I won’t. Do you know why that is?” slowly asked Tsuchimikado while crouching down next to the man. A cold look could be seen beyond the lenses of his glasses. “Because this way is more effective. The sight of a crippled herbivore being devoured by hyenas is quite unpleasant. I recommend you hide somewhere and wait out the storm.”

Fugan Ryuuzou was lying on the ground having trouble breathing and Tsuchimikado unhesitatingly stomped on the man’s right knee.

He heard the dull sound of the joint breaking followed by a scream.

“Agh…aghaaahh!! Agyagahh!?”

“This is what you get, you piece of shit. The plans you prepared were used to make a weapon to kill my little sister. You don’t get to say you had nothing to do with it.”

“Shit! Damn you!! I’m still handcuffed. How am I supposed to run away without my leg!?”

“Don’t ask me. If the hyenas find you, your life is over. Crawl away. That suits you.”

Tsuchimikado headed for the back of the tanker truck while ignoring the designer writhing on the ground.

Fugan could do nothing with his arms restrained behind him and one knee crushed.

Despite his erratic breathing, he loudly asked, “Ow… What is it? What are you willing to go this far to search for!?”

Without turning around, the jacketed boy replied, “The Agitate Halation project.”

Everything had changed the instant he had gotten involved in that.

In that case, the identity of the person who had thrown his little sister into a sea of flames had to be connected to that project.

Part 3

Learning facilities were often created with public funding. That was why those nonprofit institutions often managed to not be pushed on by the flow of time.

For example, a library.

And unlike a middle or high school, elementary schools (mostly) did not need to worry about entrance exam preparations. For that reason, the libraries near them did not have a specialized space for quiet studying. Some might then wonder what the point of the building was, but if one took a step back and looked at it, it may have looked like a day care center.

“Nyah, nyah! Santa Claus really, really does exist! Nyah!!”

“Don’t be stupid. There’s no way Santa is real!!”

Despite that fairly chaotic argument being shouted back and forth in the afterschool library, the young female librarian did not try to stop them. Even if the library was meant to be orderly and quiet, she may have felt this was better than the complete silence of the library being empty because no one read books anymore. There was also the Learning Core facility nearby that was a combination of a museum, a library, and other similar institutions. The library needed to compromise if it was to survive.

The blonde-haired, blue-eyed elementary school girl in the center of the commotion was Fremea Seivelun. Her class was having a debate over whether Santa Claus existed. The class had split between the “he does” side (mostly girls) and the “he doesn’t” side (mostly boys) and the situation had almost developed into a fight. Every time Fremea moved about roughly, the white rhinoceros beetle key chain on her red backpack would shake around.

This conflict would produce nothing but sorrow, so the class’s intellectual girl (with glasses) had made a suggestion to put an end to it. She had suggested going to the library to check to see who was right.

And so…

“Nyah! See, it says it right here! In the first place, Santa Claus exists!!”

“You idiot. That’s a picture book!! Japan’s skies are protected by radar. If a sled was flying through the sky, it would be spotted right away!!”

“Nyah! In the first place, what is radar!?”

“I don’t know, but radar is radar!”

But then the intellectual girl (with glasses) found a book that mentioned that NORAD, famous for ballistic missile defense, used radars and satellites to track Santa Claus. This only confused the situation further.

A few of the boys who had grown tired of the fight, decided to make a pass at the young female librarian (with giant breasts). She had been trying to

read an SF novel (that she had brought from home) which used way too much hard slang to ever receive a translated version.

“Hey, hey. Does Santa exist or not?”

“I make a point of not discussing religion, baseball, politics, or what the best ramen shop in Japan is.”

“Is it true there’s a miniskirt Santa?”

“Eh? There’s a bearded old man wearing a miniskirt?”

And then a new development occurred with Fremea and the others who were still arguing.

It started with a comment from the intellectual girl (with glasses).

She nervously asked, “Um, Fremea-chan?”

“Nyah! What is it, Azumi? In the first place, are you trying to say Santa Claus doesn’t exist too!?”

“N-no, it’s not that.” The girl named Azumi seemed to hesitate over whether she should say something but finally spoke. “Hey, Fremea-chan. If Santa really does exist…”

“Nyah?”

“There’s a story in Germany about a black Santa Claus that kidnaps bad children. So is that true too?”

A new topic had appeared.

Panic filled the afterschool library.

Part 4

As expected, Fugan Ryuuzou’s tanker truck was attacked within minutes. The situation was reminiscent of leaving a sugar cube near an ant hill. At first, a few groups began fighting over it, but they soon realized it would all be for naught if someone called Anti-Skill. Once they decided to work together, they used gas burners and high pressure water jets to disassemble the tank and take away all the gold bars.

The weapons seller who owned the truck had hidden directly below it. It had been a desperate strategy forced onto him by his inability to move. If any of the men had glanced under the truck, his death would have been unavoidable.

“…”

Tsuchimikado was on the roof of a nearby building.

He was monitoring the situation using binoculars that could digitally change the magnification. One of the hyenas may have been keeping track of the time with a stopwatch because they scattered at exactly seven minutes. Tsuchimikado started hearing Anti-Skill sirens two minutes after that, but it was of course too late.

(Now then…)

Tsuchimikado took a deep breath and pressed a few buttons on the side of the binoculars.

He switched the mode over to one that displayed a few glowing bluish-white lines on the cityscape below. The lines were all straight but took countless turns along the way as if they were carelessly travelling through a maze. Needless to say, the lines indicated the escape routes of the hyenas who had taken the gold bars.

Tsuchimikado had added a special "scent" to the gold bars Fugan had collected.

(When things go this well, I start to suspect a trap.)

The hyenas had started fighting when they first saw each other, so they were obviously not comrades. The different teams naturally used different escape routes.

However, as Tsuchimikado watched on from the rooftop, the scattered groups started to converge on the same point.

(Just as I thought, someone bigger is secretly controlling all of the hyenas.)

Tsuchimikado noted the location and then left the building rooftop.

The hyenas all gathered at a coin laundry in District 7. Or technically, the ruins of one. None of them were stupid enough to try to just take the gold bars with them. They needed to be "laundered" by melting them down and altering their form. A large-scale facility was needed to process so much gold, so the hyenas left their gold bars at the coin laundry to let a specialist handle it.

However…

The person controlling the hyenas would of course disappear with the gold instead.

Tsuchimikado hid near the abandoned coin laundry and waited for the hyenas to leave. As he continued to watch the abandoned building, a new

figure appeared. Once he saw a young woman drive up in a street cleaner and enter the building, Tsuchimikado followed.

Two men were set up as guards at the entrance, but they were on the lookout for weapons and esper powers.

The street cleaner, the guard rail, the street signs, and the asphalt.

They were surrounded by all sorts of hard objects, but they did not give them much thought. A blow to the head knocked them both unconscious.

Partially to prevent a surprise attack, Tsuchimikado tossed the men into the abandoned building.

“Hi, there.”

“!?”

The young woman wearing a tight jacket and a long skirt frantically turned around and brought a hand to her back, but then she froze in place

Tsuchimikado smiled.

“That’s right. If we start a firefight here, Anti-Skill will show up. Those gold bars are heavy. You would have to abandon the treasure you went to such effort to gather.”

“Dammit… You put a ‘scent’ on them, didn’t you!?” spat out the young woman as she kicked a dirty dryer.

The ruins of washers and dryers lined up along the wall had likely been used as lockers by the hyenas. By telling them which dryer on which row to use, each hyena would put their gold bars in one of the lockers without realizing a different hyena put gold bars in the locker right next to it.

“I didn’t expect to find the Spider Queen was behind this. You’re one of the official intermediaries. There are even rumors that you’re an AI with no real form.”

“Stop it. I was already regretting that I’d lost my edge. I was seriously considering retiring.”

Tsuchimikado let out a small sigh and said, “Do you want to know what kind of perfume I used? You’ll have no way of laundering the gold without that information. There are some scents that stick around even at the high temperatures needed to melt gold.”

“Tch. What do you want in exchange?”

“The Agitate Halation project. …Who would want to kill someone over that name?”

“Do you really think I know everything the higher ups are after? If so, you’re overestimating me.”

“But you pay careful attention to the soldiers below you. Your specialty is spreading your web to control people.”

“Even that has its limits. I can only wrap my web around those I deal with directly as an intermediary.”

Tsuchimikado almost burst out laughing when he heard that.

It was a blatant lie. But it was also the answer he had expected.

He had already lost a fair bit of time, so he made a mental memo that he needed to take some shortcuts.

“That may be the industry rules, but it doesn’t add up. You’ve spread your web around everywhere to control the entire battlefield. And that means you need information from more than just your allies. …You’ve been spying on people, haven’t you? On your enemies, on your allies, and on the data controlled by the other intermediaries.”

The Spider Queen let out a deep sigh.

And then she said, “Maybe I should give up on the gold and kill you here.”

“I suppose you would be eliminated if this information got out. If it was me, I would fake my own death and get cosmetic surgery. And you just so happen to have the funds for it.”

The young woman only grew more frustrated and scratched at her hair.

“I get the feeling you’ll torture me if I give this answer, but I don’t know. I haven’t been given any jobs or allocated any personnel related to the term Agitate Halation.”

“Could you have taken the job without being told the name?”

“It’s certainly possible, but if I was, I think I would have heard the term at some point during the job. If any of my pawns see something they were not meant to see, they have to give a debriefing. After all, there are certain taboos that must be hidden no matter what. However,” added the Spider Queen. “This is the age of the internet. Some of the most dangerous jobs are given directly to the pawns without using an intermediary. Although that just seems like suicide to me.”

“Do you have a way of knowing when that happens?”

“There are a few pawns who have left my control in the middle of another job, but that’s all I know. You’re free to try your luck and attack these

pawns, but you might find they're involved in some other dangerous project that has nothing to do with Agitate Halation."

"That's fine," replied Tsuchimikado with a shrug. "Give me the list. …I'm not expecting to easily pick the right one. I'm just hoping I will find the right one after trying all of them."

The Spider Queen pulled a memo pad from her jacket pocket, jotted down a few names, ripped off the page, balled it up, and tossed it toward Tsuchimikado.

"That paper is made from corn starch and the pen uses chocolate ink. If you eat it, you will digest it. Do you understand what I'm getting at?"

Tsuchimikado checked the names and then swallowed the list.

He grimaced.

"You could at least fry it and add some salt."

"Is that so? Well, those are the ones who ignored my services and took jobs on their own. You could say they betrayed me. You can deal with them however you like. How about you fry them and add some salt?"

She used people as she saw fit and then responded like this when she was betrayed. Perhaps one had to be that way to survive in the city's darkness.

"I've told you everything I know. …What number is the perfume you put on the gold?"

"Clairpharm #1056."

"Shit!! That's a cheap one that disappears at 300 degrees!!"

The Spider Queen looked angry enough to ignore her situation and start firing her handgun like crazy, but Tsuchimikado merely smiled, raised his middle finger, and left the abandoned coin laundry.

The memo he had swallowed had listed around 10 names.

The odds were extremely good that one or all of them had driven Tsuchimikado Maika to her death.

Part 5

Who is the terrifying black Santa Claus!?

His official name was Knecht Ruprecht. This mysterious person was occasionally spotted in Germany. The good children would have presents brought to their houses by the normal Santa Claus while the bad children

would be visited by this creepy black Santa Claus who covered himself in pitch black clothes. Those bad children would be stuffed into a giant bag and would never be seen again. No one knew what happened to the bad children after that.

“Ny-nyahh…”

“Don’t worry!! Santa doesn’t even exist in the first place! It’s unscientific! Both the red and black ones don’t exist!!”

“No, Santa Claus exists! In the first place, I know the truth!!”

“Then that means the black Santa is real too! He’ll probably be stopping by your place.”

“Fgyaahhh!!”

It was evening while Fremea and the other children were trembling and heading back to their dorms in District 13. The elementary schools were gathered in this district and the dorms provided many more services than those for older children. Naturally, some people wondered why the children were left unsupervised as they walked home if both the school and the dorm were so heavily supervised. However, letting them walk home was considered important for many different reasons: it gave them firsthand experience with the traffic rules, it prevented them from becoming too out of shape, it helped cultivate a sense of direction, it helped develop their spatial awareness, it taught them how to read a map, etc.

However…

This allowed ghost stories to be told on the way home from school.

It was not unusual for Anti-Skill to come running after someone spotted a mysterious person hanging around, but it always turned out to be a sociologist or folklorist studying the creation and spread of rumors.

The intellectual girl (with glasses) named Azumi nervously said, “U-um, but the black Santa Claus only takes away bad children.”

“Nyah. And?”

“If the black Santa Claus does exist, won’t he stay away as long as we are good?”

That was of course the exact reason German mothers spread the story, but Fremea and the others did not think it through that far.

“Ny-nyah… You’re right. Then we’re safe! Nyah!”

“Don’t act like you’re a good kid.”

“Nyah! In the first place, if the black Santa Claus is coming, he’ll be coming for you!!”

Another fight broke out. The white rhinoceros beetle key chain on her red backpack shook as she moved.

And then…

The intellectual girl (with glasses) named Azumi tugged on Fremea’s clothes. Fremea looked over in confusion to find Azumi frozen stiff and looking off into the distance. She was looking quite high up. Her gaze was fixed on the rooftop of one of the buildings lining either side of the road.

She had glimpsed some sort of black figure.

It had been so quick she had not seen the details, but she had definitely seen the black figure holding some sort of large white cloth.

“It’s the black Santa Claus…” muttered Azumi.

He really existed.

And this black Santa Claus supposedly abducted bad children. Once Fremea’s thoughts made it that far, she let out a gasp.

“H-Hamazura’s in trouble!!”

“?”

Meanwhile, Kuroyoru Umidori, a partial cyborg and resident of the city’s dark side, frowned while jumping from building to building. She wore a top and bottom made of tight black leather and a white coat with just the hood over her head.

She had heard some kind of commotion on the surface, so she wondered if something had happened. (Although she was not the type to go help if something had.)

“Well, who cares. I have work to do. …Wah!?”

Kuroyoru let out a shout just as she tried to get back to the task at hand. She had almost stepped on a girl wearing a white dress who was sleeping on the rooftop with a body pillow shaped like a white rhinoceros beetle. Kuroyoru could not guess where the girl had gotten it, but there was a chicken sleeping next to her while puffing itself up with its feathers.

“Mumble mumble… Dreams are so delicious…*This information is worth eating…*”

“She’s insane…” muttered Kuroyoru Umidori before quickly leaving.

Part 6

This was an old story.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu had successfully infiltrated Academy City.

However, his guess of it lasting three days had been a bit too high. It had actually taken only 36 hours for him to be found out as a spy sent by the Anglican Church.

If he had been even a bit slower making his preparations, he would have been assassinated.

On that day, Tsuchimikado Motoharu had been forced to go from being a spy for the magic side to being a double spy who passed information to both science and magic. This had all been according to plan, but both the Anglican Church and Academy City were not single solidified organizations. He had to pay careful attention to ensure he was not stabbed in the back by someone.

He and Tsuchimikado Maika had ended up living in separate student dorms, but their relationship had started to change bit by bit.

"That is a good sign."

It had probably been Bishu who had laughed and told him that over the phone.

While observing Maika, he had discovered that she always wanted to share her possessions with others. She loved cookies and chocolate, but she would readily split them with others. She would finish her homework early so she could show it to her classmates the following day. It sounded good to say she naturally liked to help others, but as an intelligence specialist, Tsuchimikado Motoharu had immediately determined what it was that motivated this side of her.

She wanted to be useful.

What that meant completely changed when one realized it was because she did not want to be abandoned by others.

That was why she had always given others the #1 spot and shared her possessions with them.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu had set one of his goals to eliminating those worries and fears of hers. If he was going to use her in the framework of a family member, he had decided he needed to give her every benefit of being in a family. He had seen that as perfecting his camouflage.

But he had failed.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu had always been an expert spy. If necessary, he could fake a coincidence, approach his target, and become their good friend within 15 minutes. Yet even he had failed. He had watched the direction of her gaze, the strength of her tone, the trembling of her lips, and the minute movements of her fingertips. He had accurately read everything about Tsuchimikado Maika from the visible reactions on the surface of her body, but all of his prearranged conversations had ended in failure.

“Hey, I hear there’s a school that trains maids in District 7.”

She had said that when she was just about to enter middle school.

She had wanted to be useful. She had even wanted to perform physical labor for others.

According to Tsuchimikado Motoharu’s analysis, that had been based in dark fears of being abandoned.

But she had said more.

“Helping everyone live their lives with a smile is the most wonderful dream I can think of.”

Once she had revealed her cards to that extent, Tsuchimikado Motoharu had finally realized something.

He had been analyzing Maika under the assumption that everyone had a hidden side. That was why he had completely misread her and had not given her what she wanted.

Tsuchimikado Maika had not been an enemy during a spy mission.

She had been family.

She had not been someone whose every statement and action he had to read between the lines of so he could act first.

She had finally let him realize such a simple fact.

“Ahh…”

In the end, Tsuchimikado Motoharu had been wrong to think he needed to save Tsuchimikado Maika.

It had been the same as someone cleaning his room when faced with a huge pile of homework. It had been nothing but an escape. He had wanted the goal of mentally saving his stepsister as a distraction from the pressure created by the constant threat of an assassin from either the science side or the magic side.

And so…

From that moment on, Tsuchimikado Motoharu had silently sworn to truly protect his little sister.

He had sworn to protect that true family member who had slowly taught him something so obvious.

Part 7

The first was Anjou Haruka.

She was found floating face down in a District 18 river.

The second was Kuromatsu Takao.

He was found hanged by a rope from a tree in the mountains of District 21.

The third was Imagawa Shiguma.

He was found with gum stuffed down his throat in a back alley of District 15.

…

…

…

"!!"

Tsuchimikado jumped from rooftop to rooftop.

His gaze was fixed on the back of a man around 15 meters ahead of him.

He was in District 15. This chase scene through Academy City's largest shopping district had started in an underground mall and eventually moved to building rooftops.

(You aren't getting away.)

These were the 10 possible members of the team that had been tasked with killing Tsuchimikado Maika.

A quick investigation had found that nine of the ten were already dead. And these were not natural deaths. Now that their job to kill Tsuchimikado Maika was complete, they were being buried in the darkness. It was the most obvious sort of one way trip.

This man was the sole survivor.

This could very well be the last person who knew who had truly been behind the plot to kill his stepsister.

(I will not let you get away!! If you get away after all this, I lose everything!!)

All of the previous victims had been killed by some form of suffocation. The second victim had been hanged by a rope just long enough that he could barely reach the ground on his tiptoes. Whoever had killed him had gone to a lot of effort to ensure the death was by suffocation.

This was a combination of surefire results and a cruel sense of playfulness.

Tsuchimikado did not know who had done it, but they had clearly been a specialist. The person was enough of a specialist that a lead of only one minute or even one second could influence the fate of those involved.

"You shit!!"

The fleeing man pulled out something.

Its barrel was too thick to be a submachine gun. It was a handheld grenade launcher.

With a muffled noise, an object was fired in a parabola. Tsuchimikado frantically jumped to the side.

The weapon did not produce a normal explosion.

Instead, a high-pitched whistling sound burst out.

"Gah….!!"

(An ultrasonic weapon!!)

The weapon had been developed for quickly suppressing an enemy in a location such as a museum or armory where secondary damage had to be avoided at all costs. Simply put, it used noise to tear apart the lungs from the inside. That cruel toy would cause anyone directly hit by it to drown in their own blood.

(But its range must be really small if I was able to avoid it at the last second. Why is he using something like that?)

The man fired a second and then third canned coffee-sized object.

Instead of trying to hit Tsuchimikado, he seemed to be trying to cut off Tsuchimikado's paths of escape.

(It uses a timed fuse. It takes somewhere between 3 and 5 seconds!)

Tsuchimikado reached around to the back of his chic jacket and pulled out a semi-automatic handgun. He did not even have time to carefully aim. He pulled the trigger and shot one of the grenades out of the air.

"Ah…" said the man in surprise, but Tsuchimikado ignored him.

Tsuchimikado ran through the opening he had made in the wall of grenades.

The man who had hastily assumed Tsuchimikado was done for quickly prepared to flee once more. He frantically swapped out the thick magazine for his weapon and grimaced when he saw something on a display. He opened a cover on the grenade launcher and sprayed some kind of coolant inside.

"…"

Tsuchimikado's first shot hit the man in the shoulder.

Before he could even cry out, the second shot hit the coolant spray the man had dropped at his feet. It exploded.

With an unnatural white steam enveloping his legs, the man fell face down with his eyes opening wide. He seemed unsure whether he should touch his ankles which had been transformed into something like a frozen fish.

"Gyah! Gbh!! Uuh…My legs…!?"

"Don't move," said Tsuchimikado Motoharu as he approached the man while circling around the white steam. He returned his handgun to his belt. "Modern technology can perfectly thaw out your legs as long as they take extra care while transporting you to the hospital. But once they break, they can never be fixed. I recommend not provoking me."

"Shit," cursed the man as he slammed a fist against the concrete floor. He clenched his teeth, but he understood that he could not escape. "What do you want to know?"

"Nine of your colleagues were killed over the past few hours. You are the only one left. Do you know why this might be?"

"…"

While the man fell silent, Tsuchimikado slowly placed his foot on top of the man's frozen ankle.

This ankle was now less reliable than a biscuit.

The man frantically shook his head.

"Wait! Wait!!"

"Tell me everything you know."

"I am…well, what they call a 'destroyer'!!"

"…?"

"I slip into large projects at the bottom level. I then intentionally cause trouble and secretly kill my colleagues. Those that want the project to

succeed no matter what will want a greater guarantee of their success. They don't want any more problems and so the price of each individual soldier is driven up."

(In that case…)

Tsuchimikado thought back over the names of the nine who had already died.

He thought back over the fates of the team sent to carry out the mission.

Their deaths had not been an attempt to cover up the evidence of the plot to kill Maika.

"Heh. I did quite a bit of damage, didn't I?"

"You piece of shit…"

That was also why the man used those ultrasonic weapons with a low destructive range when another type of grenade would have been more dangerous.

He was the specialist who had insisted on suffocating them. There had been no perfect way of estimating their time of death. However, this made it obvious they had been killed just before they were meant to attack Maika.

"But I didn't expect what happened next. I thought I had stopped the fire by killing those nine, but there must have been more people involved than I thought. The overall plan continued and now I'm not getting paid because I 'didn't do my job'."

"Who is it?" asked Tsuchimikado in a low voice. "Who is behind all this!?"

"That's all I can tell you."

"Do you want me to shatter one of your legs?"

"This is as much information as I'm willing to give in exchange for my legs! If you're gonna do it, then do it. I'd rather live the rest of my life in a wheelchair then anger this person!!"

"I see."

All emotion disappeared from Tsuchimikado's eyes.

Every last hint.

"Then I just have to do something even more horrible."

"What?" said the man nervously, but Tsuchimikado ignored him and stuck a hand inside his jacket.

He pulled out the kind of simple travel toothbrush sold at any convenience store.

“Wh-what?”

“What do you think I’m going to do?”

Tsuchimikado also pulled out a small tube similar to the ones containing sauce for a bento. He squeezed some toothpaste out of it and onto the toothbrush.

“If you use this in a way it is not meant to be used, you can make even a battle-hardened mercenary cry like a baby. So how can I use this normal toothbrush in such a devilish way? Hint: mucous membranes.”

Tsuchimikado applied a great pressure on the man by intentionally leaving out the details.

The man was caught by the technique in just two seconds.

He already had both legs literally frozen, but now he was unable to even move his fingertips.

“Stop…wait! Stay back!! Stop!!”

The man’s shouts suddenly ended.

Something like a dart had stabbed into the side of his neck.

It had been a long distance attack.

“!!”

Tsuchimikado suddenly jumped behind an outdoor air conditioning unit. But he quickly realized that was not enough.

(What was that? Did that dart just fall straight down from the sky!?)

Once he had crawled into the gap between the air conditioner and the concrete floor, Tsuchimikado finally had time to carefully yet nervously observe what had happened.

“…”

The back of the object had feather-like objects attached and the sharpened needle on the front had the sort of drug administering case used with tranquilizer darts. However, the effects were not those of a tranquilizer.

“Gh..bh!?”

The man choked oddly.

His skin grew purplish red around where he had been hit on the neck. The area quickly swelled up. It looked like plastic being heated in a fire. As the

skin bulged out from within, the right half of his face swelled so large a face recognition program would not have recognized him.

“Gy-gybh!? Gagaaaaahhhh!!!???”

Tsuchimikado clicked his tongue as he watched the man yell out and writhe on the ground.

He recognized the man’s symptoms.

It was not all that rare a thing.

“Formic acid!!”

That substance was found in bee venom. However, this man had been injected with a huge amount, so the change had occurred all at once. He had to be swelling below the surface as well and the swollen flesh would be constricting his windpipe.

In other words, he was being suffocated.

Just like the nine who had already died.

The attacker had chosen the same method this man had used as a “destroyer”.

(Is this supposed to be ironic?)

That “destroyer” had killed nine people on this day alone, but Tsuchimikado thought it was unlikely someone had come to take revenge.

This was likely the person behind the entire plan.

This was the act of someone who knew who held the more dangerous information. This person had understood who to attack to cut the last thread leading back to them.

(Still, this is pretty cruel. His death is unavoidable, but he’s going to suffer for over 15 minutes before finally dying!!)

Normally, insect venom was only used to disguise a death as natural.

Using it at such an escalated level showed this person had an abnormal obsession.

And…

(How did they shoot this? It wasn’t a normal sniper rifle. This was a direct hit on the neck of a target lying on the ground. You can’t hit something like that so easily. *Unless it was dropped down from above,* they couldn’t have hit a target lying down like this!!)

There were weapons that fired up into the sky and dropped down onto the target from above. However, those were normally used to fire explosives, not for accurate sharpshooting.

(Is this another nasty piece of cutting edge technology? Or was some esper power used to help out? Either way, this is no normal opponent.)

Tsuchimikado heard a hard sound repeating at irregular intervals.

The man could no longer even grab at his own throat. His arms were sprawled out and convulsing. The sound came from those arms hitting the concrete.

"H-hel-…"

The man turned his head to look at Tsuchimikado.

The swelling was no longer contained to the right half of his face. He had not been punched even once, but it was becoming hard to tell the front of his head from the back of his head.

"…Help…me…"

(Shit!!)

There was nothing he could do.

If he so much as poked his head out, he would be hit with that bee venom just like the man had been.

"I can't do anything to help. This is your only chance to leave a dying message. Will you let them have the last laugh or will you use your last breath to get back at them. Choose for yourself!!"

"I…don't want…to die…"

Tsuchimikado heard a squishy noise.

"…Help…me… I don't…want to die…"

"Stop that. You should have known you would never meet a proper end once you set foot down this path."

"……"

It was impossible to tell where the man's eyes were looking, but he still stared Tsuchimikado in the face. The man could not make any proper expressions, but Tsuchimikado understood what emotion he was filled with.

Tsuchimikado clicked is tongue and spoke.

“This is toothpaste.” He tossed the bento sauce sized tube toward the man’s hand. “The magnesium carbonate inside is weak, but it has a muscle-relaxant effect. Swallow it all! That will free up your windpipe!!”

“I-I’ll survive…?”

“Yes.”

“You’re really saving me…?”

“Yes, now hurry!! Do you want to die because you waited too long!?”

While still lying on his back, the man frantically grabbed at the toothpaste tube. He could barely hold on to it, but he gathered all of his strength to slowly, slowly bring it to his mouth.

“…Thank…you…” said the man while barely able to form the words. Tsuchimikado did not want to listen. “Thank you…so much…”

It was impossible to tell if the man’s eyes were open or not, but some clear drops of liquid fell from them. And then the man spoke a single name to Tsuchimikado.

It was the information Tsuchimikado had wanted most.

The name belonged to the person behind it all.

“…”

In the next instant, the man’s entire body began to convulse violently. This happened the instant he poured the toothpaste into his mouth.

The magnesium carbonate inside did not have the effect Tsuchimikado had said it did.

It was obvious what would happen if that thick substance was poured down the slight gap left in his throat.

There was nothing Tsuchimikado Motoharu could have done to save the man.

And so he had given him the one thing he could: a quick release from his pain and fear.

(…Dammit.)

He still did not know where the sniper was or how the sniper was targeting him, but the sniper had to know Tsuchimikado was there. And he doubted the sniper would overlook him when it was possible he had received some information from the man.

Tsuchimikado might have to wait dozens of hours before he could crawl out from under that outdoor air conditioning unit.

He could not let himself be stuck here.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu gritted his teeth while hiding in the slight space between the air conditioning unit and the concrete floor.

(I have to break through this floor.)

Normally, that would be impossible. He could not destroy a thick concrete floor with his bare hands. He had undergone Academy City's psychic powers development, but had only received the ability to apply a weak membrane over torn blood vessels to stop the bleeding. He could not use that in a destructive manner.

However…

He had another power. One could call it his trump card.

But in exchange, he bore the risk of tearing apart blood vessels all across his body.

(I don't know how many times I will be able to use this trump card, but I have to use it here!!)

Magic.

This was worth taking that life-or-death gamble.

The words that man had spoken on the verge of death had been…

(A member of the board of directors…)

Part 8

Tsuchimikado Motoharu escaped the sniper by destroying the building's roof with magic and taking refuge inside. An unpleasant straining sound came from his entire body and blood soaked his clothes in places. Each time he took a breath, he tasted blood.

(Shit… The worst result the very first time!!)

"Cough, cough!!"

He had injured a thick blood vessel.

He knew this, but did not have time to call an ambulance.

The sniper would soon realize he had lost Tsuchimikado. Once he did, he would contact the person running the Agitate Halation project and put them on guard. If this person disappeared, Tsuchimikado would lose his chance to attack the one who had driven Maika to her death.

He forcibly regulated his breathing and used an underground tunnel to travel through the shopping district just to be safe.

From the moment that man had told him that name, he had already known where he needed to go.

Most of Academy City's elementary schools were gathered in District 13, so it received a relatively large law enforcement budget. To prepare for worst case scenarios, different universities had also built large hospitals in the district.

One of those hospitals was officially known as a detached part of a university, but it was actually operated for the sake of *a single patient.* It would treat over 500 patients every day, but all of those were handled by the hospital's "excess" ability.

"Doctor."

"Yesss?"

A woman in her thirties slowly turned around when a young nurse called out to her. The woman was also wearing a white coat, but unlike the nurse's, its design made her look like a doctor or scientist. Her nails were manicured and her long hair was curled and left loose. From a sanitation standpoint, this was not suited for hospital work, but no one tried to stop her.

This was direct proof that this was no ordinary hospital.

The nurse who wore a pink coat and a cardigan spoke expressionlessly.

"I have the test results for Mr. Gerascophobia. I also have the treatment schedule for "I am fat because of a fried chicken conspiracy"-chan and a complaint to the hospital from the Clean-Freak Princess. Please look over it all."

"…Um, Rensa-chan. You can give the patients friendly nicknames if you like, but keep it within the nurse station." The woman in the white coat who had been referred to as "doctor" spun her index finger around. "One other thing, Rensa-chan."

"What is it?"

"This is a hospital, so keep your electronic output from getting too high."

The nurse tilted her head in puzzlement.

She had been reading her report from a cell phone screen.

“I have it set to airplane mode, so it is not transmitting any signals.”

“*That isn’t what I meant.*”

Rensa remained expressionless and the white coat-wearing “doctor” gave a bitter smile.

And then…

A quick change came over the fluorescent lights on the ceiling. It was less a flickering and more a slight dimming before returning to normal.

“…”

Rensa remained silent and lightly brought her fists together in front of her chest.

After hearing a dull sound, the “doctor’s” cheek stiffened.

“Rensa-chan, you’re a nurse, remember? And what is a nurse’s job?”

“The power has switched over to the emergency power supply.”

“Seems that way.”

The hospital had newborns and patients who would have trouble without life support devices, so an attack on the power supply was a life-or-death problem. Nevertheless, the “doctor’s” expression remained completely unchanged.

For one, Academy City’s power was supplied by countless wind turbines, so there was little danger of a major sudden power outage even if a portion of those were attacked. And even if one did occur, this hospital had a second power supply created by underground generators.

The lights in the hallway had not cut out even for a second.

The same went for all of the electronic equipment. They had not even needed to restart.

“Buuut anyone who would bother attacking here would know that.”

“I shall exterminate them.”

“That means their true goal might not be what it seems at first glance.”

“I shall exterminate them.”

“Please, Rensa-chan. Please give some other answer.”

“Doctor, you said ‘please’ twice.”

“Is this really the time to bring that up?”

The enemy had attacked the hospital's power supply as if to cause a power outage.

However, no real damage had been done thanks to the emergency power supply.

If the enemy was clever at all, they would have known this would happen.

And yet the enemy had still taken the risk of making the attack.

That meant the attack had held some other meaning. Was there some merit in having the hospital switch over to the underground power supply facility?

"Oh, damn." The "doctor" slapped her hand against her forehead. "*This was to see what rooms are brought online first!* Even if the entire hospital recovers in a fraction of a second, power is restored to the most important equipment first!! This defeats the purpose of the hospital's labyrinthine structure and all the hidden rooms!"

"Search complete. The top priority is the Sticky Freezer on basement floor 5."

"Rensa-chan, what did I tell you about the nicknames? …But I suppose the Critical Pathogen Specimen Freezer is the most dangerous. In that case, Rensa-chan, please take some soldiers to check it out."

"Understood. What will you do?"

"I will be evacuating just to be safe☆ That's the protocol after all."

After waving her hand next to her face, the "doctor" opened a nearby door and stepped inside an empty ultra-high frequency treatment room. She locked the door behind her and roughly pushed aside a metal box-shaped piece of machinery with a high voltage warning on it. This revealed a small door that led directly to a service elevator shaft. If she climbed down a maintenance ladder, she would have a direct path to the underground parking garage.

"Physical labor is so exhausting," she complained.

"My apologies," replied a voice.

The "doctor" froze in place and then slowly looked around the room. She had no idea where he had been hiding, but a bloody boy was now leaning against the wall next to her. He was Tsuchimikado Motoharu.

"…"

After a short silence, the "doctor" tried to leap into the elevator shaft. However, Tsuchimikado was faster. He dragged her away from the shaft by

grabbing the back of her neck and then slammed her back against the box-shaped device with the high voltage warning. He then grabbed the control box hanging from the ceiling by a cable.

Her body jerked unnaturally and she collapsed to the floor.

“Next time, it won’t just be for an instant. I’ll have you sit in the electric chair until your eyes boil.”

“Gh…Cough…”

The “doctor” coughed up sticky saliva while trying to speak.

Her arms and legs were cramping, so she could not stand up.

“Umm, can you please explain what is going on here?”

“The board of directors,” said Tsuchimikado in a cold voice. “Anyone with that level of information would have some idea what is happening here. And they would know I will not hesitate to kill right now.”

“W-wait a second. You seem to be making some kind of mistake. This hospital is…”

“Yes, I know. This facility is an anti-terrorism trap disguised as the location of a member of the board of directors. Anyone who has given themselves to the darkness even a little would never even think of attacking such a dangerous place. …But the trick is that *a member of the board of directors really does live here!* The idea that this facility is a trap was a rumor spread for show. Isn’t that right!?”

“Heh. Eh heh heh.”

“Yakumi Hisako. That old woman is one of those twelve VIPs and has an especially strong influence in the medical field. She is who I am here for.”

“This hospital is built like a maze. I doubt I know my way around even a third of it. How are you going to find where this old woman’s room is?”

“*I am already speaking with her, Yakumi.*” Tsuchimikado lightly poked at the control box hanging down from the ceiling. “Anyone with as powerful connections to the medical field as you can easily receive anti-aging treatments. I already know your real age is over 70. Now, how about we have a nice chat.”

The “doctor” let out a breath.

The look in Yakumi Hisako’s eyes completely changed.

“If you knew you were dealing with an old woman, why would you use that electric shock?”

“Your bones and organs are healthier than mine.”

“What do you want?”

Yakumi glanced over to the exit from the ultra-high frequency treatment room.

There was no sign of anyone coming. In fact, Yakumi herself had locked the door from the inside.

“Is it that Agitate Halation project? Or is it that dorm fire meant to hold you in check?”

“…”

An unpleasant noise came from Tsuchimikado Motoharu’s fist.

“If you want to kill me, go right ahead.” Yakumi smiled while spreading her hands that were still trembling while she lay collapsed on the floor. “But then you will never arrive at the truth.”

“…I know that,” replied Tsuchimikado with a thin sigh. “*That project is being run by a member of the board of directors, but not by you.* It’s him.”

“Then why?”

“Unlike with you, I have no clue to his location. And so I needed to create a handhold to help me scale the cliff.”

As he spoke, Tsuchimikado stuck his hand in his pants pocket.

Yakumi Hisako’s expression stiffened when she saw what he casually pulled out.

It was a cylindrical glass container about the size of a pinky finger. Tsuchimikado read its label aloud.

“Wild Card Coccus. It’s labeled as very dangerous.”

“…”

That was a highly virulent killer bacteria.

Its method of infection was very complex and it would mix in with other microorganisms and multiply. It could be transmitted via air, blood, mouth, or skin contact. It could grow even more dangerous by combining with athlete’s foot, lactobacillus, or other extremely common pathogens.

Yakumi Hisako recalled that Rensa had been sent to the “Sticky Freezer” in the basement.

They had not noticed the change when he forced his way into the facility.

It had been the opposite. He had already finished.

“Making my way in was easy enough, but I couldn’t find a good way of making a U-turn and leaving without being noticed. I decided to set off the alarm myself to distract the guards while I let a VIP like you show me the way to the escape route prepared for you.”

“You can’t mean to use that bacteria to negotiate…”

“He won’t be able to ignore me, will he?” Tsuchimikado waved the specimen case around. “And I can’t spend too much time convincing him I’m serious. That’s why you will give me the ability to quickly persuade him.”

“…?”

“Members of the board of directors have to have a means of contacting each other. There must be some address you can use to directly reach him. Hand that over. If he receives a message card from Yakumi Hisako’s address informing him of the upcoming attack, he will believe it.”

Yakumi tried to point at her clothes with a trembling finger, but she could not quite manage it. Tsuchimikado crouched down and performed a body check. He pulled out a pink smartphone.

“The password is 7071,” said Yakumi as if spitting out the words. “Do you know exactly who to call?”

“All too well.” Tsuchimikado used his thumb to type in a short message and sent it to one of the addresses recorded in the phone. “Kaizumi. Kaizumi Tsugutoshi. …He’s just an ordinary old man, but the bastard has tamed the monster known as Kumokawa Seria as his brain.”

Part 9

“What do you think?”

“This is bad.”

In a high-rise building in District 3, Kumokawa Seria gave a blunt response to Kaizumi Tsugutoshi’s question. That office that took up an entire floor of the building had a chic coloration centered around antique wood. Gentle classical music filled the air, but it failed to provide any calming effect.

Kumokawa tossed some reports onto a large desk while sinking into the leather chair the owner of the room was supposed to sit in.

“You understand what I mean, right? *I am not talking about the appearance of that Wild Card Coccus.*”

“I am well aware of that,” said the old man bitterly.

The progress of the Agitate Halation project. An outline of the individuals and organizations investigating it. A list of all those involved in the suspicious student dorm fire, be they victims or perpetrators. All the information needed to arrive at the truth of this incident was laid out on that desk.

And at the same time…

It was obvious what it meant that they had all that information.

“This is still very bad.”

“But you did predict this could happen.”

“Yes, but this is the worst of the predicted scenarios. What should we do now?” asked Kaizumi while tapping on one of the documents with his index finger.

His fingertip seemed to be stabbing at the forehead of the person pictured there.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu.

The greatest rabid dog at the moment.

He was wholly unrelated to their original plan, but he could no longer be ignored. Tsuchimikado needed to be dealt with even if it meant temporarily putting the main plan on hold.

Kumokawa Seria let out an annoyed sigh as she looked at that photo of an underclassman from her school.

“If we call in more guards, he will just sneak in with them. If we try to leave here, he will attack the defenseless escape vehicle. Even if we lure him into an empty building and blow the entire thing to pieces, he will fake his death and kill us in our sleep once we let our guard down.”

The scariest part of a spy had nothing to do with the great firepower or nimble mobility displayed by Hollywood action stars. Their true value lay in their ability to disturb information. Was the information before your eyes true or not? Who was an enemy and who was an ally? Was it safe to think you had won or not?

“So we can only sit and wait for him to arrive?”

“Yes. But first call off all of the normal guards. Once you chop down all the trees in the forest, there is nowhere left to hide a tree.”

Gathering a proper military force and using proper strategy would provide great power, but it would be of no use here. It was best to assume the boy would use it all against them.

“But I doubt this will end with nothing but a conversation.”

“*Given what we did, that is to be expected,*” said Kumokawa in annoyance.

She was looking at a photo of a burned student dorm room. Kumokawa knew about Tsuchimikado Motoharu’s “little sister”, but she only felt “annoyance” well up within her when she called the girl’s face to mind.

The adult world was not so kind.

They had a great plan they had to see to fruition. If people dealt with every little clichéd revenge story, the guy at the top would switch out twice a day. They did not have the time.

“After eliminating as much of what he can use as possible, we can send someone to intercept him. I will make the proper preparations to ensure breaking in the front door is the only route available to him. He will be dealt with there.”

“That requires a powerful individual to face him. Do you have any ideas?”

“Yes,” she simply replied. She implicitly stated that this was part of her duty as the brain who compensated for her client’s deficiencies. “I will go. And I will use a method his type hates most.”

Part 10

“…”

While hiding near the high-rise building Kaizumi Tsugutoshi hid inside, Tsuchimikado Motoharu switched off a few devices. He had been using devices such as a parabolic microphone and a laser bug that worked on windows to monitor the situation, but he could not detect any noise whatsoever.

He decided this went beyond a large number of troops hiding silently inside or excellent defenses against listening devices.

(He called all of the guards out of the building. Is he luring me in?)

If the man cared about his life at all, it was difficult to think Kaizumi would have fled from the building in an automobile or a helicopter. That would allow a single shoulder-fired missile to end the battle. Assuming the man had not done that, why had he removed all of the guards?

(He wants to keep me from mixing in with the guards and he wants to make sure he knows I’m dead. Someone truly dangerous is waiting for me inside.)

It was possible the entire building would explode as soon as he made his way far enough inside, but his opponents did not know where the Wild Card Coccus specimen case was. If they were smart enough to realize crushing Tsuchimikado to death risked releasing that deadly virus, they would not use some bold strategy in District 3 which held many important administrative and diplomatic facilities.

And either way, he had to finish off the one who had driven Maika to her death.

It did not matter if this was a trap. All that mattered was that his target was here.

"…Time to go," muttered Tsuchimikado before tossing the bugging equipment in a roadside garbage can as it would only get in the way now.

Given the number and locations of the entrances to the building, he decided the risk of countermeasures would be the same for all of them. He boldly walked through the main entrance and into the entrance hall.

The entrance hall was three stories tall and even had tropical plants and waterfalls decorating countless waterways. A semicircular reception counter was located directly ahead and gates equipped with metal detectors were located to either side, but the receptionists and guards were nowhere to be seen.

"I thought you would choose this route."

A female voice seemed to fill the entire basketball court-sized space.

Tsuchimikado looked further up.

A gentle staircase connected the first and second floors, but it seemed more like a decoration than a functional staircase. A black-haired girl wearing a winter sailor uniform stood on the second floor portion.

She was Kumokawa Seria.

She was Kaizumi Tsugutoshi's brain. It was possible she was not simply a helper and was truly the mastermind behind the entire incident.

Either way, she had been heavily involved in Tsuchimikado Maika's death.

She was a target for his revenge.

"For all the preparation you put into this, you chose the wrong place to wait for me," said Tsuchimikado quietly. "You can't escape a bullet from there. You have no nearby cover."

“Stop that. Didn’t you hear me say *I thought you would choose this route*? This building has nine entrances total. You entered my first choice. …Why wasn’t that enough for you to realize I have complete ‘control’ over you?”

“…”

Kumokawa Seria was not a very valuable existence when it came to Academy City’s psychic powers development.

Nor did she excel at using guns or assassination techniques.

Nevertheless, she had worked her way through the darkness until she had practically been absorbed into the board of directors.

There was a reason for this.

She could control human hearts. And she did so with no special powers or drugs. She controlled people solely with her words. She had taken this to a level that rivaled bullets and blades.

“There are many different magic tricks, but they all belong to one of two types: the ones that are enjoyable until the trick has been revealed and the ones that eternally retain their value even after the trick has been revealed. It goes without saying which type is more difficult to pull off.”

“Is the Agitate Halation project really this important?” muttered Tsuchimikado. He finally bared his teeth and forced down the anger that was so intense he almost felt it would materialize around him. “Is it really important enough to drive my little sister to her death?”

“I have no obligation to respond to that.”

“Have you forgotten I have a biological weapon with me?”

“You mean the Wild Card Coccus? And where might that be?” asked Kumokawa with a mocking smile. “You were never planning to bring that dangerous bacteria to the battlefield. You didn’t have the guts. I knew you would never have that live bacteria in your pocket and I knew you would never infect yourself with it before confronting me. …If I had not known that, I would not be standing here without a mask and protective suit.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“By how you chose to convince us you had it. The most effective way of doing so would have been to scatter it around somewhere beforehand. However, you chose not to do so. You chose the ridiculous option of emailing us from a special address. You were practically announcing that you wanted us to believe you had it despite your unwillingness to actually prove it.”

She was dead on.

That Wild Card Coccus was powerful, but it could be easily sterilized by exposing it to powerful ultraviolet light for a certain period of time. That was part of what created such a danger of it being used as a weapon. The real specimen case was in Tsuchimikado's pocket, but he had stopped by a tanning salon on the way. The contents were dead.

"So you finished profiling me before I arrived."

"You are the type of person that likes to think of himself as different from the others in the city's darkness. You could say you have a professionalism that is common in this field. …*Or you could say you have a weak heart that seeks that as a means of justifying what you do.* You may have gotten a lot of people involved on your way here, but they were all those that reeked of the darkness. And so you would never choose to bring in an indiscriminate weapon like the Wild Card Coccus."

"Then can you read my pain?"

"I find it to be horribly clichéd."

"I suppose it is," admitted Tsuchimikado. And then he gave a cruel smile. "But you have not read everything about me. All of your calculations may be accurate, *but that doesn't matter when your original data was faulty.*"

"Are you aware you are only thinking that *because I led you to think it?*"

"If so, that's fine. And that leaves…"

"…nothing left to discuss."

Tsuchimikado Motoharu and Kumokawa Seria came to the same conclusion simultaneously.

This person is in my way.

I must quickly eliminate them to achieve my goal.

Tsuchimikado made the first move.

He brought his right hand to his back, pulled out a fully-auto handgun and aimed at Kumokawa's position on the second floor. He pulled the trigger and a high-pitched string of gunshots rang out.

However, he did not hit her.

This was not because Kumokawa moved exceedingly quickly. Nor did she take any tricky actions such as kicking off of walls or pillars. In fact, she moved slowly. She walked down the stairs while swaying back and forth like she was weaving through a crowd.

And yet…

“Did you think your ‘heart’ would disappear if you used a fully-auto weapon?” Kumokawa Seria smiled thinly as she walked down the stairs. “It changes nothing. As long as it is being wielded by human hands, the human heart will bleed through. And that creates an opening that can be taken advantage of. Bullets are powerful, but their effective range is only 9 mm. If you move just 9 mm away from the direct line of fire, the bullet will not hit. Do you understand what that means?”

“Tch!!”

Tsuchimikado clicked his tongue and reached his left hand around to his back.

He forcefully pulled out an L-shaped handgun, but he did not stop here.

It did not simply slip from his fingers.

The handgun identical to the one in his right hand flew in a large parabola and fell directly toward Kumokawa’s head.

An instant later, a tremendous shockwave scattered in every direction.

What had looked like a handgun had actually been a disguised grenade. Technically, the bullets remaining in the magazine had all been detonated with an electrical current, causing the handgun to burst from the inside and scatter sharp fragments everywhere.

It was deadly within a range of 3 meters and would injure anyone within 10 meters.

Normally, someone with no powers like Kumokawa Seria could not have escaped the blast. A brightly colored hell should lie beyond the gray dust.

However…

“Did you think…?”

He heard a voice.

It came from beyond the gray dust.

“*Did you think your ‘heart’ would disappear if you used an explosive?*”

“Damn you!!” shouted Tsuchimikado while firing short bursts with the automatic handgun in his right hand and running toward the staircase.

He was not trying to kill her; he was trying to hold her in place. Weaponry no longer gave him any advantage. In fact, the wall of dust robbed Tsuchimikado of too much information and gave her a chance to counterattack.

Whether she would choose to flee or kill…

It was now her turn.

Part 11

Kumokawa Seria could not teleport. Nor did she have a physical body strong enough to withstand a direct hit from a bullet or explosive.

So how had she survived having an explosive dropped from above?

The trick was the type that seemed silly once explained.

(I couldn't do anything, so that leaves only one possibility.)

Kumokawa thought to herself while slowly walking through the dust.

(*Tsuchimikado failed.* He did not throw that explosive as far as he thought he did. The wall behind me is mostly made of white marble. It helped throw off his sense of distance.)

Of course, if Tsuchimikado had taken his time to aim and carefully thrown the explosive, he would not have made such an elementary mistake.

The way Kumokawa had "easily" avoided the handgun bullets had placed a fair bit of mental pressure on him.

From the beginning, Kumokawa had expected an attack from an explosive with a grenade's level of destructive power. She had read what a merciless person like Tsuchimikado would be thinking when he faced an opponent that could read his heart and she had read what he would bring with him.

(Everything is going according to plan. I don't even have to make any slight improvised corrections. Give me something, Tsuchimikado. Anything at all. What happened to your clichéd revenge? At this rate, you'll die before we even reach 30 moves.)

The grim reaper's advance continued.

She did not run or roll across the ground like in an action movie. *That would give away her limits.* She maintained the situation where her opponent had no idea of how far she could go. After taking control of someone's heart, she would apply fear in the most effective way. Her target would be bound by their own fear and lose their true potential. In the worst cases, they would even stop breathing on their own.

And so…

It would have been a mistake to take her “next move”, be it a surprise attack or escape, while the curtain of dust cut off her enemy’s vision.

There was only one optimal answer.

To move leisurely.

By walking straight through the dust and casting aside her own advantage, she would increase the mental pressure on her opponent.

Kumokawa Seria walked down the stairs and through the dust.

In the next instant, Tsuchimikado Motoharu had approached right in front of her.

He had likely decided his gun was of no use. He would trade in his hand for something more complex and rely on his fists to defeat Kumokawa.

He first threw a punch for the face…to hide the pile driver-like stomp aimed at Kumokawa’s big toe.

The noise of a tremendous impact rang out, but Kumokawa had pulled her right foot back before the strike hit. His attack had failed. But as explained before, Kumokawa Seria’s ability was not enough to keep up with Tsuchimikado Motoharu’s “Deadly Thrust Killing Slash” fighting style that was formed from the illegal techniques of all sorts of martial arts.

And yet she had successfully avoided it.

She and that assassin in a chic jacket stared at each other from close range.

(His muscles are so tense it’s slowing him down and he is fighting fear so much he’s losing flexibility in his thoughts. It’s over, Tsuchimikado. *Your status has dropped to the same level as your average high school girl.*)

She was sure of her victory.

But then…

She heard a wet sound. At some point, Tsuchimikado Motoharu had stretched his right arm out. And she felt an unpleasant feeling scraping beyond her eyelid.

He was crushing her eye.

No, he had jammed his thumb and forefinger in, bent them, *and was going to pluck out the eyeball.*

Kumokawa’s control had always been nothing but a deception. She had only been able to trick this person who had trained for years for a short time. It was impressive enough that she had fooled him even for one strike.

But…

But!

But!!

“Ha ha! *Yes, this is the optimum answer, Tsuchimikado!!*”

“…!?”

Despite what had happened, Kumokawa smiled.

By the time Tsuchimikado realized what that meant, it was too late. Kumokawa ignored the physiological sense of revulsion coming from deep within her right eye and moved her right hand. A handgun smaller than a deck of cards appeared from her sleeve.

It could only hold two bullets and she was not skilled at using it.

But Kumokawa Seria had obtained the distance and timing an amateur needed to hit.

The gunshot reverberated in her gut.

A dark red hole opened in Tsuchimikado’s left side and he let out a groan. He collapsed backwards, so it was as if he was taking Kumokawa’s eyeball down with him. Despite the blood flowing down her face from the empty eye socket, Kumokawa continued to smile.

(A normal person would arm herself with assassination techniques and weapons if she was facing a wounded beast. A weak intellectual type would fight back using a weapon. But I trapped you in your own fear, so those simple truths disappeared from your mind.)

“Ow…!! That is why you were too naïve…” Kumokawa put the gun back in the sleeve of her sailor uniform and placed a hand over her empty eye socket while staring down at where Tsuchimikado lay on the staircase. “*You were the type to slowly savor your revenge.*That was how this revenge story was supposed to go. When you started trying to eliminate me as a threat as quickly as possible, you should have realized you were being led there by me.”

Tsuchimikado Motoharu still did not move.

With one hand still on her face, Kumokawa started to move away. She walked to the passageway circling around the entrance hall on the second floor and pulled out her handheld device. She activated a VoIP app and called someone.

She was speaking with Kaizumi Tsugutoshi, the board of directors member waiting on the top floor of the building.

“It’s over. The rabid dog who escaped his collar has been dealt with.”

“It doesn’t sound like it was easy. What happened?”

“An eyeball is a cheap price to pay for an amateur girl to defeat a monster like that.”

The hand on her face slid wetly down. She started feeling an unpleasant heat across her entire face. She felt as if her entire head had grown a size bigger.

“Please prepare the part of mine that was divided into the Micro Cosmos. I can dilute the pain through self-suggestion, but it isn’t perfect. It would be faster to add in the missing part.”

“Underst… I…the arrangemen…”

She seemed to be losing the signal because Kaizumi’s voice grew more distant.

But then Kumokawa realized that was not what was happening.

(What? It’s my ears…?)

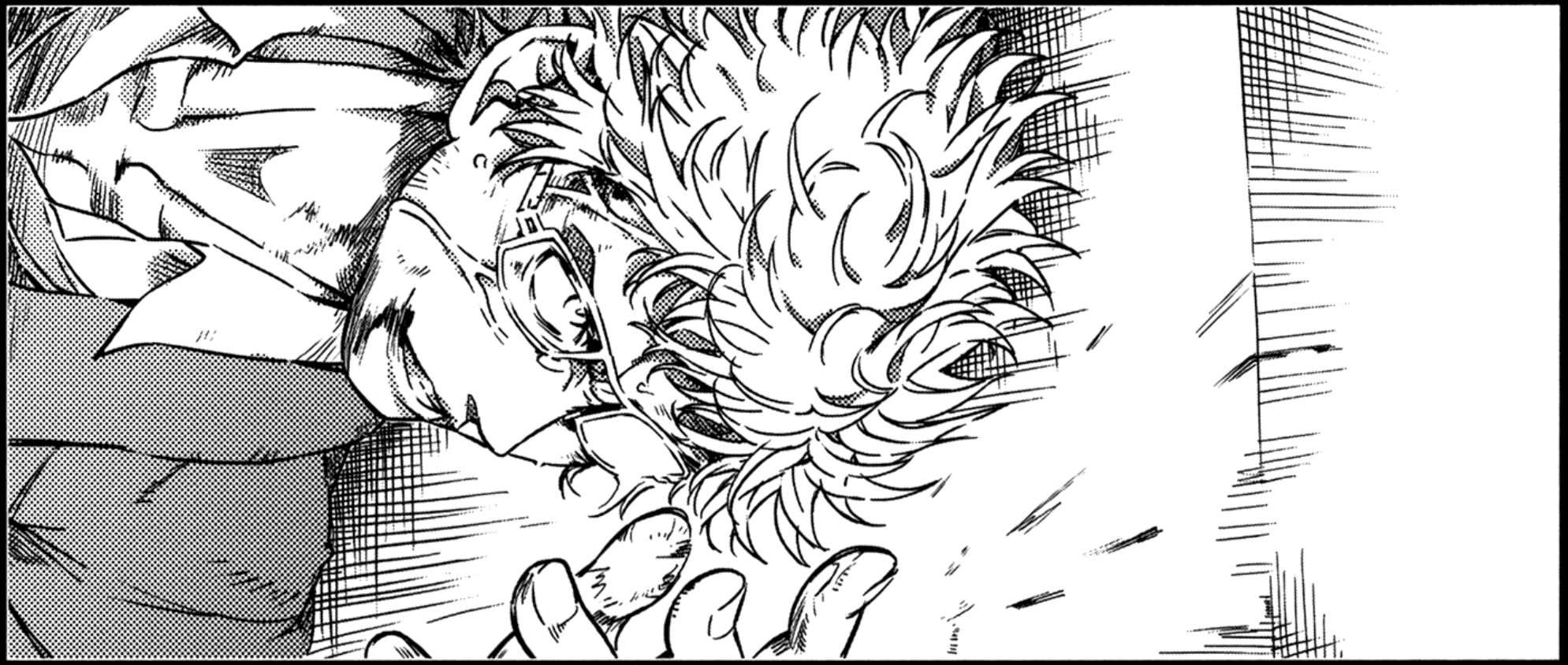
The change was coming from Kumokawa’s own body. She felt an unpleasant pressure in her chest. She first thought it was due to the blood loss, but something was still strange.

(This is similar to a placebo attack using suggestions, but it’s somehow different… What is this? *I’ve never seen anything like this before!!*)

With one hand still on her face, she leaned on the passageway railing. Her sense of up and down was growing more uncertain. She had no idea if Kaizumi was still speaking from her handheld device or if even if she was still holding the device.

This was…

This was…



Tsuchimikado Motoharu moved his bloody lips while lying face up on the staircase.

He was muttering something under his breath.

“Hey, you pieces of shit. It’s time for a sickening job. (I humbly ask your assistance like the iron and the nail.)”

Magic could be divided into the broad categories of infection magic and imitative magic.

The infection category could use objects such as hairs or fingernails. The most popular forms of curse magic would remotely attack the target by destroying a piece of one’s target using a special method.

Yes.

By ripping out her eyeball, he could make a lethal attack on Kumokawa Seria.

“This is like an assembly line. Drive the bullet straight into that bitch’s heart!! (I have a sign to the hated enemy in my hand. Follow this flesh and blood to bind a curse to the owner!!)”

With his curse complete, Tsuchimikado gave the stolen eyeball a light kiss.

He heard a wet coughing sound followed by something heavy collapsing to the ground.

He had successfully neutralized his target.

At the same time, Tsuchimikado’s body shook from blood loss while he lay face up on the floor. The eyeball slipped from his fingers.

He had used magic for the second time.

Every blood vessel in his body cried out. He coughed violently and saw that his saliva was dyed red.

“Ahh…cough, cough!! Cough!! Cough, cough!!”

Sticky blood felt like it would block his throat, but he somehow managed to cough it all up and clear a path for air. He then slowly stood up.

“Didn’t I tell you? You only had the information on me from the science side. Without the magic side data, you could never complete an accurate profile…”

Even children know about the Ushi no Koku Mairi curse. He had used a popular spell that reconstructed it to use just the hair rather than the doll. It could attack a target remotely, but any decent magician would be able to put together a countermeasure as soon as they sensed the signs. It was only effective against those who did not know magic.

(Dammit… Maybe it would have been faster to search through her trash can for some nose hair…)

Tsuchimikado headed up the stairs on unsteady feet.

He was not careless enough to use the elevator, but it did not seem to be working anyway. Using the emergency staircase would be better, but the obvious routes would likely have traps. And that was a direct route.

(I could try the air ducts, the elevator shaft, or the trash chute, but they'll probably all be booby-trapped too.)

Tsuchimikado let out a sigh.

He would never overlook a trap set up by your average member of the dark side. However, these presents had been left by Kumokawa Seria. Even if he was at 100% and had time to carefully search, he was not convinced he would be able to find and eliminate them all.

(But did Kaizumi set these traps himself? No. He wouldn't take part in the battle. That means *he doesn't know where his subordinates laid the traps.* He has no choice but to stay here. He's so focused on protecting himself that he can't move.)

If Tsuchimikado had a safe way to the top floor, it did not matter how long it took him.

With that in mind, Tsuchimikado opened and closed his hands to check on his grip.

He headed through the entrance hall and looked at the decorative shape of the building itself. He was checking the silhouette of the entire building.

(I need three points of support at all times. The protrusions don't have to be that large. 1.5 cm should be enough.)

District 3 was often used as a site for diplomacy, so a lot of attention was given to the aesthetics of the buildings. A building designed from the ground up by a famous designer would possess more elements than were functionally necessary. That created an opportunity. If it had been a rectangular building with smooth sides, he may have been out of options.

"…"

After checking on his general route, Tsuchimikado headed for one of the nine entrances.

He had to go outside first.

His next task was to climb up to the 50th floor with no lifeline.

“Gh…” groaned Kumokawa Seria.

She finally realized she was collapsed on a second floor passageway in that high-rise building.

(What…happened? Was I…rescued? No…)

Her consciousness was still flickering in and out. She had no idea how long she would last. She felt as if her eyes might not reopen if she so much as blinked.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu was not pursuing her.

There was no sign of any of the traps on the paths up having activated. If any of them had, an email would have automatically been sent to her handheld device.

(Then did he go outside? Dammit, how reckless can you be!?)

The idea had come to her before, but the observation floor on level 30 jutted out at the top. She had abandoned the idea, thinking it could not be done with normal rock climbing skills.

However, he had chosen that route without hesitation.

What frightened her the most was not how reckless it was; it was the fact that he had left her expectations.

“Gh…!!”

She tried to stand up but could only manage to make her fingers and toes move slightly.

Standing would be difficult.

Her handheld device was still lying on her palm, so she could use it. However, warning Kaizumi of the danger would be meaningless. That old man had no ability to fight. Whether it was to fight or to flee, he had lost if he was even appearing on the field.

She was contacting someone else.

Fortunately, Tsuchimikado Motoharu had chosen the insane option of climbing up 50 stories. That meant it would take a long time for him to reach the top. Even if she called someone from the other side of Academy City, they could arrive before Kaizumi fell into Tsuchimikado’s grasp.

She needed someone who would be most effective at a time like this.

She needed someone who knew who she was.

She needed someone would come running over at a moment's notice.

She knew the danger, but she could not allow that rabid dog to assassinate a member of the board of directors.

She used her thumb to call up a certain address. She mustered up all of her strength but gritted her teeth when that was not able to type in even 50 characters. She then attached a file that would automatically release the trap and allow the signal to be classified as a cell phone signal. Finally, she weakly pressed the send button.

(No…)

As soon as she pressed it, a thought came to her.

She had a very bad feeling. She was no longer even sure if the idea had really been hers. It was as if a new idea had come to her like a billiards ball after her clash with Tsuchimikado.

(It can't be…)

But it was too late. The "message sent" message popped up on the screen.

"…Uuh…"

She heard a soft thunk.

The handheld device had slipped from her grasp.

Part 12

That old man would normally never drink a drop of alcohol.

This was not because of a belief in moderation or restraint. He enjoyed music, theatre, antiques, and fine arts. He had even bought a horse and could picture the corresponding scenes in his mind when reading a train schedule or historic dates. As far as hobbies and tastes went, he indulged more than the average person. However, he felt alcohol, tobacco, and other things that (he believed) dulled the senses would only diminish his enjoyment. He preferred to enjoy his limited free time to its fullest during his long lifetime. You could even call that the principles the old man lived by.

That old man, Kaizumi Tsugutoshi, pulled a bottle of Irish whiskey from a shelf where he kept items prepared for receiving guests. He poured the brown liquid into a small crystal glass and stared at the surface of the liquid. Others would have said his face was as hard as rock, but Kaizumi himself called it a pathetic expression.

He would only choose to drink during the most unpleasant of times.

He had never before used alcohol as an escape.

The old man made up his mind, grabbed the glass, and gulped down the alcohol just like the ancient nobles drank their cups of poison when their castle was surrounded by enemy troops. He first felt a heat in his neck which quickly spread to his entire head. Kaizumi felt as if he was being strangled.

He spoke just after bringing the bottom of the glass back to the solid table.

“So he’s here.”

Just as he spoke, the tempered glass covering the wall directly behind his leather chair shattered. Kaizumi remained seated and swiveled his chair around. The sun had mostly set, leaving behind a nighttime scene decorated by countless lights. A bloodthirsty beast ignored the burst of wind and walked slowly into the office.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu was dyed red with blood. He had a dark red gunshot wound on his side and fresh blood stained his clothes in other places too. Some was likely his and some was likely to have belonged to others. In payment for climbing the outside of the building with no lifeline, his fingers were shaking and pale.

Even so, the light in his eyes beyond the thin-lensed glasses retained the look of a predator.

He calmly asked, “Are you ready?”

“I believe I am,” replied Kaizumi Tsugutoshi as he sank back into the large chair.

Tsuchimikado’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“You will not receive a quick end. Your path to death will be a long and painful one. Do you know why that is?”

“I controlled a large project with full knowledge that it would affect the lives of many people. I was prepared from the moment I sat in this chair.”

“Are you trying to act cold and unfeeling?” spat out Tsuchimikado.

The boy used all his strength to suppress the desire to rip the two sides of that old man’s body apart. That was not enough. Simply killing him would not be enough payment for the anger he felt.

His revenge had to make up for all of his anger.

If not, he would lose a target to take his anger out on and become ruled by that anger. He would become a vengeful spirit that was eternally searching for its next prey.

Tsuchimikado was aware he was only a step away from that.

“What you were involved in was simple murder. No different from me.”

“True,” honestly admitted Kaizumi.

That old man was not so young as to fool himself into thinking his actions had been just. It simply involved too much for that to be the case. However, he was not the type to be shaken if his actions were summed up as evil either. Kaizumi Tsugutoshi most feared dulling his thoughts and senses, but he had ended up giving so much focus to himself that he was almost sick of it.

“But *do you really understand what is going on here?*”

“…”

“If you kill me in any way you can think of, you will achieve your revenge. Who can say if that will make your little sister happy, but it will certainly satisfy you. However, *that will end your revenge here.* You will reach satisfaction without learning the truth.”

“…So what?” spat out Tsuchimikado in response. “I no longer care what the Agitate Halation project is. My goal is to take revenge against everyone behind driving Maika to her death. I will kill everyone who so much as helped. You are the signal gunshot that rings across the hunting grounds. You are nothing more than a victim to be shown to the others.”

“Taking revenge against everyone behind it, you say?”

Kaizumi gave a slight smile.

The alcohol seemed to be helping somewhat.

“Then will your revenge only end when you die?”

“…”

“I am not simply saying your sister’s death was indirectly brought about by your investigation into the Agitate Halation project,” continued Kaizumi when he received no response. “I know what happened. I am not a fool and I have plenty of power. I had a chance to learn what happened. It is quite simple.”

“What is simple?”

“The truth.” As the old man smiled, tension spread across his entire face. “What happened first. What led you to this quest for revenge.”

The gaze behind Tsuchimikado’s glasses did not waver.

However, his eyebrows twitched slightly. An expert like Kumokawa Seria may have been able to draw enough information from that to map out his entire mental state.

And…

Kaizumi Tsugutoshi, a member of the board of directors, made a decisive statement.

“It was you who set fire to Tsuchimikado Maika’s dorm and killed your stepsister, wasn’t it?”

A silence followed.

Technically, gentle classical music was still playing, but the two of them had completely tuned it out. That song that glorified the creation of humanity no longer left any emotional impact with Tsuchimikado or Kaizumi.

“Or to be more accurate, you learned that an attack group was targeting your family as the intelligence battle over your investigation of the Agitate Halation project intensified, so you acted first and ‘killed’ her. You kidnapped her, set fire to her room, and rewrote the official records. You killed your little sister to protect her. That is the truth of what happened here.”

“…So what if it is?”

“If it is, then this revenge of yours is nothing but a farce. The supposed death never even happened yet here you are claiming you will risk your life to make up for it! …What are you getting revenge for? Are you disguising yourself as a bloodthirsty monster to soak your sister’s death even further into the darkness!?”

“Yes,” said Tsuchimikado almost in a groan. His tone was that of someone who had just been explained some basic fact everyone already knew. “That doesn’t matter. I didn’t really care.”

“…?”

“If I hadn’t ‘killed’ Maika, some group or another would have killed her sooner rather than later. There would have been nothing I could do. And that was enough. Just having someone targeting her life was enough to pass *the boiling point*. That gave me a reason to fight.”

“But this veers sharply from all your previous actions. You have always remained behind the scenes. Who even ordered you to investigate the Agitate Halation project? No matter how many people the instructions passed down through, your intermediary would not have wanted you to take such obvious actions.”

“Of course not.” Tsuchimikado took a step across broken glass shards. “Do you…do you really think I can calmly do my job like normal? Do you really not understand something so simple? Have you gotten so rusty I need to explain everything from the beginning? Fine, I’ll tell you.”

He paused for a beat.

And then he spoke as if confessing some definitive crime.

“Kaizumi, I killed my little sister.”

His voice was oddly gentle.

Or perhaps it should be described as the voice of someone who had lost the core of their being and had lost all emotion.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu’s mouth uttered “words” more mechanically than the classical music filling the room.

“It doesn’t matter if it was only faked on paper. It doesn’t matter if no one died. It doesn’t matter if she was given a sudden request from her maid school to clean some strange building. It doesn’t matter if she’s even now mopping the floor in confusion. It doesn’t matter if she’s perfectly healthy and has no idea her dorm has burned down or that she is thought to be dead. It doesn’t matter if her room, its interior, its furniture, and everything else will be restored back to normal by the time she finishes the work and returns to her dorm.”

Tsuchimikado held no blade or firearm.

The distinctive aura of one who has been utterly destroyed was all it took to crush Kaizumi’s spirit.

“I still killed her.”

These were the ruins of his ideals.

This was the empty carcass of his beliefs.

That betrayal of trust had transformed into hatred. And the strength of that trust had led to a powerful rampage that was not easily destroyed.

“The thing is, Kaizumi, I raised my hand against my own little sister with the techniques that I was supposed to only use behind the scenes in the darkness. Yes, I know. I know what you’re thinking. I’ve been deceiving her

and lying to her all this time. These are the rules I set for myself and I don't expect anyone else to understand them. But even so, I had drawn a line! I had sworn I would never bring my sister into this filthy world!! But you made me do that!! You!! This was something I swore never to do! And yet you gave me no choice but to do it!!!!!"

"…"

In that moment, Kaizumi Tsugutoshi's expression was a complex one that could not be described with any of the standard emotions. But Tsuchimikado did not notice. He pointed at that old man and shouted accusations as if he did not even know who he was accusing.

"Do you understand now, Kaizumi!? Do you!!? You…no, all of you destroyed the gears I had set up!! How long do you think I can maintain my rationality and reasonability now? I'm done for. And now that I know that, I have decided to deal with everyone involved in it before I eventually forget how to stand on my own two legs!! I will deal with everyone who led me to kill my little sister!!"

"Then," said Kaizumi quietly. "Let me give you one piece of advice. The Agitate Halation project runs much deeper than you think. After becoming as deeply involved as you have, there is no turning back. And…prepare yourself. The situation is only going to grow worse."

"What are you talking about?" spat out Tsuchimikado while glaring at the old man. "You're the one behind it! Or are you saying it's such a valuable project that a donut-shaped outer group that you can't control has formed!? Or have you set up some backup that will take over when you die!?"

"You will understand soon enough," replied Kaizumi with a slow sigh. The hands holding the armrests of the leather chair were covered in sweat. "You will not listen to what I say here. That is fine, but just know that it does not end here. …It seems it was a success. The situation is hardly good, but it seems a better result has arrived at the very, very end."

"Stop joking around," muttered Tsuchimikado as he took a large step forward.

He used a hand to brush the various reports off of the thick table and forcefully opened a drawer. He began pulling objects out and slamming them onto the table.

"A fountain pen! Nail clippers! Cold medicine!! ….Do you still write letters in the age of emails? Then you must have a paper knife, a glue stick, and a stamp sheet!! Do you have any idea how much pain and fear I can cause with just those objects? I'll show you. Don't think you'll be able to die of

shock. By separating out the components of the cold medicine, I can create a countermeasure against that. Remember what I said? Your path to death will be a long and painful one. You can look forward to learning the details later, but just know that you will be *in full bloom while still alive like a rafflesia.* Life is a classroom up until the very end, so make sure to pay attention. I'll teach you the negative techniques that humanity has built up with a dark smile!!"

"I see." Kaizumi let out a sigh while still sitting in his chair. "I suppose those would be cruel techniques to use on your ignorant little sister."

Tsuchimikado silently swung his fist.

After silencing the old man with that blow, Tsuchimikado tied his arms and legs to the chair with wire.

He started with the glittering paper knife.

It had no blade, so it had little ability to injure. However, that meant it could lengthen someone's suffering if used properly.

"I will leave your face untouched," he announced with words sharper than the knife in his hand. "But not out of kindness. Most of your five senses are located there. However, I will thoroughly destroy everything else. Seeing your body change form is much more of a shock than you think it is. That will be the first step. And you will have to accept with terror that this is only the first step."

"That is unlikely to happen." With blood trailing down from the corner of his mouth, Kaizumi stared Tsuchimikado straight in the eye. "I doubt you have the time."

"You have no pawns left. Kumokawa Seria was defeated. No normal soldier can find the traps she set up. Your allies will only be taken out by the net another ally left behind. That is why you did not call in reinforcements, right?"

"This has nothing to do whose side anyone is on."

"Are you saying some completely unrelated hero of justice will show up? If this world was that convenient, the darkness would not have existed as long as it has."

"Someone is coming," declared Kaizumi decisively. "A hero is coming. However, this is no kind coincidence. You should grasp a piece of the truth once it happens. You could say this is like a special game of billiards. Or perhaps a form of mutual destruction. Either way, you will learn what you have been involved in and in what form."

“What?”

As soon as Tsuchimikado frowned in confusion, a soft electronic tone sounded.

The office was soundproofed, but an internal speaker was used to inform Kaizumi when the elevator arrived.

When he realized someone was coming, tension ran across Tsuchimikado’s skin like an electric current. Something was wrong. Something was very, very wrong. Someone had been able to use the elevator normally, Kumokawa Seria’s traps had not activated, and someone had arrived to interfere just as Kaizumi had announced. However, the feeling Tsuchimikado felt was not in response to all of those aspects of the situation.

The problem could be simplified further.

Kaizumi had said it was like a game of billiards.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu and Kumokawa Seria had clashed. His defeat of her had directly led to “someone else” arriving. It was just like how the cue hitting a single ball caused a chain reaction of balls hitting balls until the needed ball fell accurately into the pocket.

“Know this: I do not know who is coming. This person may have done nothing wrong and may have nothing evil about them.” Kaizumi was speaking much more quickly than before. This implicitly told Tsuchimikado that the man felt he was running out of time. “However, this person will certainly be your enemy. …Damn. Why did I not realize this until now? Their goal was not for the two of us to defeat each other. I was never even one of their targets! They wanted you and this other person to defeat each other!! From the start – the very, very start – this was all meant to eliminate you!! It all stretches back to the attempt on your sister’s life! The answer was staring me in the face the entire time!!”

“…”

(What?)

Tsuchimikado Motoharu’s head filled with questions.

(Who holds the cue in this game of billiards and what pocket are they aiming for!? My clash with Kumokawa and Kaizumi were nothing more than a means to an end? Then what have I begun here!?)

Defeating one enemy created a new enemy. However, this was not a simple case of revenge. In terms of billiards, that would be hitting a ball straight forward into another ball, but that was not the case here. The movement

was much more complex. This was a type of acrobatics where the balls in the way were jumped over to reach the target ball.

He had decided to climb up that 50 story height because his opponent was Kumokawa Seria. That would not have happened with a different enemy, with a different ball.

The same could be said about the fact that he had been badly injured on his way to Kaizumi's office.

One person against another.

One hero against another.

What if there was a system to freely create a battle at an unspecified time and place so that two individuals defeated each other?

What if this coming battle was the final battle? What if it had been set up ahead of time to accurately land a specific ball in a specific pocket? What if that was why the ball named Tsuchimikado Motoharu had been sent out to strike against all those other balls?

"Answer me…" said Tsuchimikado to the man tied to his chair with wire. "Answer me!! How were you involved in the Agitate Halation project? The way you're talking, it almost sounds like…!"

"*I was working to destroy the Agitate Halation project.* Just like you, I viewed the one behind it as much too dangerous. That was why I assumed they wanted to knock our two balls into the pocket. I assumed they wanted us to defeat each other. I decided my failure to stop the project was enough to say I was involved with your sister's death. As long as you would destroy the project after I was gone, that was enough for me. …And you would have rejected the truth even if I had tried to tell it to you."

"How could this happen…?"

He had misread the target for his revenge.

He had worn his body down pursuing the wrong target.

And now someone who had been pushed forward just like he had had arrived at the floor to finish him off.

The balls in the way would be avoided and only the targeted balls would be struck from the perfect angle to send them into the pocket.

But it was too late by the time he realized it. He could not turn the situation around now.

"What will you do?" asked Kaizumi. "If the two of us are defeated, no one will be able to stop the Agitate Halation project. This is the worst possible

turn of events! If you are going to flee, do so now. Is there no way for you to safely escape now!?"

There was not.

The enemy controlled the entire billiards table.

"I have no choice," decided Tsuchimikado while steadying his breathing. The heavy double doors slowly opened before his eyes. "I don't know who this is. They might be good and they might be evil. But I can't let myself be defeated here. I still have to carry out my revenge!! I can't let that end here!!"

However…

Tsuchimikado's words were like a forced injection of vitality after he had fallen into despair. And they were cut off before he could continue.

His eyes opened wide.

He let out a trembling voice when he saw who stepped into the room.

"You're…kidding me…"

But when he thought about it, this may have been the possibility that he had feared the most.

Part 13

Kamijou Touma stepped inside that high-rise office in District 3.

When he thought about it, everything leading him here had been strange. It had started with being tricked by Tsuchimikado Motoharu and thrown into the School Garden. In there, he had guessed that everything related to the Altar of the Wisdom King had been a lie and had seen the news saying Tsuchimikado's little sister Maika was dead. The girl controlled by Shokuhou Misaki, Academy City's #5, had helped him somehow escape the School Garden. As soon as he had turned back on the cell phone he had turned off so no one could track him with it, he had received *an anonymous email from an unidentified address* telling him where Tsuchimikado was. He had followed the directions to District 3 and then to this elevator.

And now…

Kamijou set foot inside a large office that he would never have even seen in his normal life.

Despite being on the 50th floor, the tempered glass window had been shattered and documents were scattered around the room. The old man who likely owned the room had his arms and legs bound to his chair with wires and Tsuchimikado stood next to him. Unlike normal, the boy had his hair dyed brown, wore thin-lensed glasses, wore a chic jacket, and was covered in blood.

This was clearly no normal situation.

But at the same time, Kamijou intensely felt that something was very off about the situation.

It was a hopeless feeling as if a billiards ball that could not be allowed to fall into a pocket would do so no matter where the cue ball was hit.

“What…is going on?” asked Kamijou in confusion.

Had Tsuchimikado trapped Kamijou in the School Garden with the story about the Altar of the Wisdom King in order to keep him from seeing this? However, Kamijou refused to believe that everything happening here was based on Tsuchimikado’s own malice. This was not simply a desire to trust his friend. The situation was simply too unlike Tsuchimikado. The scene before Kamijou’s eyes looked like an extended version of someone giving into their anger and beating someone else over the head with an ash tray. Tsuchimikado would not choose such a simple method even if he chose to use violence. Even if there was something he could never forgive, he would work all the harder to remain rational and aim for a perfect victory. So why?

The expression of the old man bound to the chair changed as if he had realized something.

“Wait… Is he still only a stopped ball? If so, this is bad. The ball the enemy has hit is you, Tsuchimikado! The next move is not yet set in stone. If you stop moving, the collision of balls will come to an-…!!”

The old man trailed off when Tsuchimikado pulled out a handgun and beat him on the back of the neck with the grip.

After knocking the man unconscious, Tsuchimikado stared at Kamijou.

“Kami-yan, how much do you know?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all! Tsuchimikado, I…”

“That’s the most troublesome answer. It gives me nothing to base my decision on,” spat out Tsuchimikado. “But from the look in your eyes, I take it you’ve at least heard of my sister’s death. I have to take revenge for that. Whether it was a coincidence or I was tricked, I’ve been running in the

wrong direction, but what I must do has not changed. I will continue. And this is a path you can never follow me down, Kami-yan!!"

As he shouted, Tsuchimikado unhesitatingly pointed his handgun at Kamijou.

Kamijou stiffened, but he did not hear a loud gunshot. Instead, he heard a much quieter metallic clicking.

"So this is another result of my clash with Kumokawa. Honestly, this is one hell of a game of billiards."

Tsuchimikado clicked his tongue and tossed the gun aside.

"Tsuchimikado…"

"Words are not needed here."

Tsuchimikado's body wavered unsteadily.

Spirit. That word was the only thing keeping him standing.

"From the severity of my wounds, I don't have time for a long chat. And since you don't know the situation, you can't put together an argument that will convince me. …Kami-yan and me. Someone hit the cue ball so we would both fall into one of the pockets. There is nothing left for us but violence!!"

"Wait, Tsuchimikado!! Shit!!"

He did not even have time to swear.

Tsuchimikado stepped forcefully forward and charged at Kamijou with tremendous speed.

A fistfight began.

The Tsuchimikado Motoharu that Kamijou Touma knew was well-versed in banned techniques and he would not hesitate to use them to accomplish his goals. He knew just how much pain those attacks would bring, but he used them anyway. He forced down his own thoughts, gritted his teeth, endured each and every tragedy, and ultimately put an end to a much greater tragedy. That was the sort of person he was.

That was how he fought and those were his principles.

This was an opponent Kamijou could never defeat.

Yet…

And yet…

"Wh-what?"

Kamijou twisted his upper body to the side and evaded the arm that was violently swung toward him. He succeeded. He also avoided the fingers stabbing for his eyes and the foot trying to wave its way between his legs. Sometimes he would evade and sometimes he would block.

It was not simply that Tsuchimikado's speed had dropped.

In fact, despite all of his injuries, Tsuchimikado's speed remained greater than Kamijou's.

However…

That speed was meaningless.

When he had defeated Kamijou with overwhelming force before, he had given off a hopeless sense of intimidation. That was now gone.

Kamijou saw nothing but actions before his eyes. Nothing but movements. Nothing but phenomena. That was all it was. It was as if he was looking at an empty shell of the human named Tsuchimikado Motoharu. This was a mere shadow of his former self that could not even be called the ruins of the original boy.

And so…

"What are you doing?"

A dull sound rang out.

Tsuchimikado had not struck Kamijou with one of his banned techniques. It was the opposite. It had been an amateurish punch thrown just by swinging a fist as hard as one could. It had flown straight into Tsuchimikado's jaw with disturbing accuracy.

Tsuchimikado's upper body swayed.

Kamijou had gotten in a clean hit, but he felt nothing in his heart.

After being hit, Tsuchimikado continued further forward, so Kamijou was forced to fight back with punches and kicks. Each and every strike hit Tsuchimikado. They all ended up hitting. Each time, the boy staggered. His feet grew more and more unsteady. This was not the Tsuchimikado that Kamijou knew. It was like watching a king of professional wrestling passed out drunk in a filthy back alley. Kamijou's heart was filled with overwhelming despair.

"What are you doing!?"

He wanted Tsuchimikado to tell him he had interpreted this wrong.

He wanted to hear that this had all been a game. He wanted the boy to turn everything around with a single special attack.

He wanted the boy to coldly demonstrate the difference between an expert and an amateur and then arrogantly announce that he would take care of everything.

And yet…

Sounds of great impacts rang out again and again. Tsuchimikado Motoharu finally collapsed to the floor. Kamijou climbed on top of him. He threw his fist down on the boy again and again and again while tears welled up in his eyes.

"What is this? What the hell is this!? Is this really you? Is this who Tsuchimikado Motoharu is!? No, it isn't. No matter how injured you might be and no matter what situation you might be in, *you are not someone so weak you would lose to the likes of me!!*"

The very act of winning this fight felt like some tremendous blasphemy.

It was like a crowd ignoring the masterpiece a great composer poured his heart and soul into yet giving a standing ovation to someone slamming their fingers against the piano as a joke.

"…"

Even with Kamijou's entire body weight holding him down, Tsuchimikado spat bloody saliva at Kamijou's face. Was he trying to blind him or was he trying to surprise him into losing his balance? Either way, Kamijou blocked the weak surprise attack with his palm. He was able to block it.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu may have run out of ideas.

All light left his eyes and the back of his head fell to the floor.

Why had this happened?

What did Kamijou gain from this victory?

It had ended before he knew what had caused it or what this result meant. He could not imagine what ideals had been in conflict. He could not imagine what anyone had wanted to achieve at the risk of their lives. His opponent had been a fellow human being, but he could not imagine how he might have ended up in the same place had conditions been different.

And yet…

It was over.

"What the hell…?"

Clear drops fell from Kamijou Touma's eyelids.

"What the hell!?"

These were the most bitter and pathetic tasting tears in the world.

He instinctually knew that this was the flavor of disgrace.

"I shouldn't have been able to win no matter what I tried… There has to be some trick. Something I'm not aware of!! Dammit, don't make me accept this ending. I don't even know who I let win! Who did I give victory to here!? Tsuchimikado, who were you fighting? I wasn't your final objective, was I!? Why did you even have to continue fighting until you were so worn down!?"

He received no response.

It may have no longer mattered.

"Why did you have to lie to me!? What is going on here? What kind of incident is this!? How…how are you involved in all of this!?"

Tsuchimikado Motoharu ignored Kamijou and let it all come to an end.

No matter how many dominos had been lined up, they could not continue further if a thick wall was placed in the middle of them. Kamijou simply stood on the board as that wall while ignorant of the overall layout of the dominos.

"Answer me, Tsuchimikado! Answer me!! Dammit. Dammiiiiiittttttt!!"

It seemed Tsuchimikado had no intention of saying anything more. Kamijou raised his head and looked around. The old man was still bound to the chair with wires, but he was still unconscious. He would be no help.

The office was quite high up and the window had been shattered, so a powerful wind was blowing in. Piles of documents lying scattered on the ground were blown into the air. They described many different things: the Agitate Halation project, those connected to the project, a list of those pursuing the project, the student dorm fire, a list of both the perpetrators and victims, and partial records of Tsuchimikado Motoharu's actions over the last couple of hours.

"…"

Kamijou grabbed one of the documents.

It gave the name of the central figure running the Agitate Halation project that Tsuchimikado had apparently been investigating.

This was a member of Academy City's board of directors. This was one of those ultimate VIPs.

The name given was Yakumi Hisako.

Between the Lines 2

A certain hospital in District 13 had some unusual equipment and facilities prepared due to its university connections…or at least that was the official reason. It had a large electric furnace that could surely and swiftly dispose of bodies carrying dangerous viruses, it had nanotech pharmaceutical production devices that could do work on a level more minute than the membranes and valves of organs, etc. Even for a hospital connected to a university, it contained far too much equipment that was out of the ordinary.

“Hee hee hee.”

A woman laughed within a room that was more sanitary than any normal room in a hospital, especially one a normal patient would want to stay in.

She was Yakumi Hisako.

This dimly lit room that was secretly known as the “planning room” was the sole place she could relax and feel at ease.

“Hee hee hee hee hee hee hee hee!! Hah hah!! Gya ha ha!! Oh, I can’t stop. I can’t, I can’t, I can’t, I can’t!! Ee hee hee ee hee! I-I can’t stop laughing! I’m dying!!”

The nurse known as Rensa tilted her head in confusion.

“An error has occurred in the experiment.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Tsuchimikado didn’t do enough to kill me. He let me go. His hated enemy was before his eyes and he didn’t even know it! He went out of his way to avoid the ball he wanted and sent an unneeded ball in Kaizumi’s direction!! Hah hah! This was a huge success!!”

“Whether it worked in your advantage or not, an error is still an error. Shouldn’t you give this more focus?”

“It’s okay,” replied Yakumi with tears in her eyes. “If Agitate Halation had exceeded its acceptable margin of error, I would have been killed. I made an appearance on the billiards table and yet here I am still alive. …That confirms it. Agitate Halation is now unstoppable. We can now move on to the final phase of the project. Let’s throw everything into chaos.”

“Doctor, I must remind you that the primary objective of Agitate Halation is in its practical applications…”

“I know that. This is just a side effect. Buuut it’s just human nature to want to enjoy it if you can,” said Yakumi Hisako offhandedly while Rensa checked the schedule while standing next to her. “By the way, is there aaany other job I need to deal with at the moment? If possible, I would like to focus on Agitate Halation.”

“Nothing urgent enough to need your attention, doctor. Fatty-chan, Wrinkly-san, and Mister Psychedelic are all doing well.”

“Using those nicknames doesn’t tell me anything. Leeet’s see, what about Enzu-san?”

“The private clinical test of the designers’ gel that rearranges the structure of cholesterol has begun. The amounts are being carefully adjusted to acquire accurate data, but the thrombus should be complete in about a week. It is still too soon to know for sure, but this may be an excellent assassination weapon that would slip past any forensic investigation.”

“What about Akinai-san?”

“The private clinical test of the inhaled oxygen level regulation technique using low frequency suggestion has begun. It has allowed us to increase or decrease the concentration of oxygen in the blood without the use of any drugs. It is still too soon to know for-…”

“That one is not for assassination purposes, so is he okay?”

“We are calculating the data needed to use it as a nonlethal weapon for threats by rapidly increasing the number of wrinkles and spots on the target. Although changing the parameters would allow it to kill via hyperventilation.”

“Okay. And lastly, what about Kevin-san?”

“Doctor, what merit is there in developing technology to dissolve only the bones while keeping the target alive?”

“That is what we were asked for, so that’s what we will develop. It might be a form of punishment and it might be someone’s sick fetish.”

“His immunity still requires attention, but he is doing well.”

“Fine then,” said Yakumi Hisako with a nod. And then she sighed. “We certainly have gotten a lot of troublesome patients lately.”

“And you certainly have enjoyed dragging them down into the darkness.”

“Yet I rarely hear any complaints overflowing with a sense of justice. Of course when I do, I just suppress them.” Yakumi Hisako then casually added, “What a cruel world this is.”

That was all human life was to her. If they irritated her, she would send them into the darkness and if she liked them, she would miraculously save them. Either way, she took human lives lightly. She influenced them no more seriously than deciding if she wanted toast or rice for breakfast.

“Now, then. I’ve gone over the schedule, so let’s get to the fun.”

The planning room had a white board set up. Several photos were attached with magnets and thick lines had been drawn on the board between them.

“Where is the leverage point?”

“We have already located Fremea Seivelun. According to the report from that Kihara, her progress is going well.”

“The counterbalance?”

“Kuroyoru Umidori has already been guided in. She does not have the ‘disposition’, but it is estimated that an opposite will be affected in its own way.”

“Then carry on as planned, Rensa-chan.”

“Understood,” immediately replied Rensa while still standing.

Yakumi Hisako reached for a desk in the planning room. She pulled a dart out of a pencil holder that also held some writing tools. The dart was colored with black and yellow stripes. Anyone would be naturally cautious of a living creature with that design.

When a special bullet known as the Sniper Bee had been created, this large model had been created for design purposes. Smaller versions were loaded into a special magazine that used compressed gas.

When she squeezed it between her thumb and forefinger, a clear liquid oozed out of the needle’s tip. She carelessly tossed the dart.

With a loud thunk, the dart accurately pierced one of the photos.

That photo was…

“The final phase begins. Fiiirst, let’s get the ball rolling by ending this person’s life.”

A liquid flowed down from the forehead of the person in the photo.

That liquid was not blood. It was formic acid, the bee venom that they liked to use.

“This will drag everything else into this. The entire world will be renewed☆”

Chapter 3: ??? Agitate_Halation.

Part 1

He could not just sit around in that District 3 high-rise office forever.

Kamijou Touma pulled out his cell phone.

His top priority was the safety of Tsuchimikado who had collapsed bloodily to the floor and the old man who was bound with wire to his luxurious chair.

Tsuchimikado was in especially bad shape. He had already lost consciousness. Kamijou had not trained enough to kill with just his fist, but Tsuchimikado had apparently been gravely injured before Kamijou had arrived. His clothes were stained red.

Tsuchimikado had a self-healing ability that could repair his injuries, but it was incredibly weak and could only place a thin film over burst blood vessels. It was better than nothing, but he would not recover if nothing was done.

But just as Kamijou was about to call an ambulance, a dignified elderly voice spoke up.

"…Stop that." The old man bound to his luxurious chair had spoken. Kamijou did not know who he was, but it seemed he had regained consciousness at some point. "They will check the hospital and emergency radio signals first. If you call for an ambulance, his ambulance will undoubtedly end up *somewhere other than the hospital.*"

"But…!"

"If you wish to save him, you must avoid the decisions that will surely lead to his death," said the old man in a low, quiet voice that still contained great power. The old man continued speaking as Kamijou looked back and forth between him and Tsuchimikado. "It seems the person behind this hoped to eliminate anyone who would interrupt the Agitate Halation project by having them defeat each other. The odds are high you were built into these plans. …But do not worry. The fact that we are all still alive shows that the situation has already left their expectations. He will not die. This situation proves that."

"…"

“It is possible their original plan for the situation was for *the Wild Card Coccus Tsuchimikado Motoharu possessed to leak out during the battle.* That would have infected and killed every single person here. That would have given them quite a laugh. I do not know at what stage the situation shifted away from that, but this is an excellent opportunity. And if you do not use this chance, it will lose all value. Do you understand what I am saying?”

Of course he did not.

What was going on?

Who was fighting who?

How was Kamijou Touma supposed to fight?

And most importantly…

What had led Tsuchimikado to continue fighting even with such serious injuries?

“If you claim to be his friend, your top priority must be what he was trying to protect,” said the old man plainly. “Tsuchimikado Maika. Tsuchimikado Motoharu feared that his sister would be used as a negotiation card in this battle over the Agitate Halation project. This incident began when he attempted to pull off the perfect surprise attack. However, if the ones running Agitate Halation have a greater information gathering ability than any of us, there is a serious risk that they saw through it all. If nothing is done, they will reach her. Someone has to stop them now, but the number of people who can do so is limited.”

“…This should be Tsuchimikado’s job.”

“Yes, but he is out of the picture now.”

“You make it sound like he’s already dead!! Don’t talk about him like that!!”

The old man let out a long sigh while still bound to his chair.

This was the reaction of a man who knew well how to take control of the flow of conversation rather than just trying to force his opinion on others.

“What will you do?”

He trimmed as much of the fat as he could and spoke a quick statement that would produce countless words in Kamijou’s head.

Kamijou gritted his teeth.

Even if some mastermind had placed countless balls on the table based on thorough calculations, it had been Kamijou’s violence that had forced Tsuchimikado down in the end.

He owed Tsuchimikado Motoharu a debt.

When that terrible friend awoke, he did not want the first thing he heard to be tragic news about his sister.

“Do you know where Maika is?”

“I could only determine that she was not in her dorm. After all, she is who this boy wanted to protect most. He would not let anyone find out so easily.”

However, it was possible the person behind Agitate Halation knew.

Protecting Maika was his top priority, but he did not know where Maika was. That left only one option. He had to attack whoever was running Agitate Halation to stop the attack plan.

Kamijou glanced at the countless documents scattered across the floor.

“I’ll be borrowing these.”

“What truly matters to me is that you stop Agitate Halation. But try to save a life in the process.”

“I will, but it is only her life I will be saving,” cut in Kamijou decisively. “Only one person can truly save Maika and that person isn’t me. Remember this: I will untie you, but I will become your enemy if you let Tsuchimikado die.”

Afterwards, Kamijou quickly left the office and pressed the elevator button. It had not moved to any other floor, so the door immediately opened.

The elevator shaft was covered in glass, so he could see the dazzling nighttime scenery of District 3. The buildings he could see were more than just high-class hotels. This area put a lot of effort into diplomacy and VIP reception. Psychology and sociology had to have been taken into account all the way back at the town planning stage.

The boy stepped into the elevator and pressed the first floor button.

After the door closed, he leaned against the glass wall and ignored the carefully-designed nighttime scenery to instead look at the bundle of papers in his hands.

They were the documents that had been scattered across the office floor.

He had gathered a few dozen of them.

At the top they said:

Agitate Halation Project.

“…”

Hypothesized Catastrophe 034. Concerning Damages Caused by the Sudden and Coincidental Appearance of Heroes and a Countermeasure against Them Using a Likely Level 0.

From the very title, the document was written to be as difficult to understand as possible. This was not a report written for that old man. He may have taken the documents from somewhere else.

Kamijou skipped over the detailed numbers and graphs and absorbed the information from just the parts he could understand. It was as if he was running through the document with a highlighter.

Uncertain elements referring to themselves as heroes pose a threat to the development of the advanced technology that lies at the core of Academy City. Locating a certain weak individual can solve this problem. It has been statistically proven that an immature girl is most likely to fill the role.

This individual shall be henceforth referred to as the protection target.

This project aims to artificially create *a protection target so that the unpredictable heroes will swiftly eliminate each other with a minimum of sacrifices.*

Killing a hero with standard means is difficult. They possess a unique ability to suddenly reverse situations where they have an overwhelming disadvantage. However, that ability cannot help them in a conflict between two heroes.

The elevator descended quickly and surprisingly quietly.

Even the sound of Kamijou flipping through the pages sounded loud in the silent space.

This is not simply a plan to send the heroes against each other to eliminate themselves.

The energy caused by their collision will not always be cleanly cancelled out. It is possible it will instead influence yet another hero.

This can be visualized like a game of billiards.

If the countless heroes are the balls, then the protection target is the cue that strikes the balls. The initial strike can lead to a happy ending, but it can also lead to unavoidable self-destruction.

Several complex equations followed.

Kamijou could not even understand what field of science or mathematics they were based in.

The balls are already in place. What matters is the cue, the protection target.

A protection target will occasionally appear from within the ranks of the powerful, but statistically they appear overwhelmingly more often from within the weak. An individual who will function as a cue will be chosen from among the Level 0s. This individual must be remade into *a spokesperson who will give his or her own opinions as a representative example of all of the weak.*

The backup plan using Skill-Out, the primary plan using the Freshmen, and the secondary plan using Kakine Teitoku all progressed well. The artificially-created weak individual was confirmed to fill the position of the cornerstone to resolving each of these plans. Details can be found in the corresponding documents.

If "she" is now captured and given a simple card problem that relates to the desired heroes, she will become the cue that hits the balls across the table as we wish.

The protection target's brain must be destroyed so that she holds no questions about solving the simple problems given. She simply needs the same level of intelligence as a dove so that she can solve the quiz in exchange for food.

Once the project is complete, we can send any and all heroes to defeat each other at the press of a button. With no burden on our part, we can eliminate them to create a world without heroes.

The person behind the project was Yakumi Hisako, a member of Academy City's board of directors.

Her influence was especially strong in the medical field.

And…

The person this woman had chosen as the cornerstone for her greatest project was…

Fremea Seivelun. Once this artificial protection target has been harvested, this project will be complete.

A soft electronic tone sounded.

The elevator had arrived on the first floor.

Kamijou did not know where Tsuchimikado Maika was being hidden, so the only way to stop the attack on her was to head to the place Yakumi Hisako's group was most likely to attack. He would defeat the attackers there.

The door automatically opened and Kamijou stepped out into the first floor lobby. He threw the dozens of papers into a trash can by the wall.

Overall, the lobby's atmosphere was very calm, but some sort of explosion seemed to have occurred near the stairs. Kamijou could see some blood, *but he could see no sign of anyone there.*

Without giving it any more thought, Kamijou headed for the building's exit.

He was choosing for himself to step out into the darkness of the night.

Part 2

When he thought about it, it had been an odd day.

He had felt what was commonly referred to as a "bad feeling", but such feelings held no meaning if nothing was done about them. And so Hamazura Shiage had felt that strange gloomy feeling but had continued through the motions of his everyday life as if riding a conveyer belt.

The day had ended and night had arrived.

He was sitting at a window-side table in a café near Fremea Seivelun's student dorm in District 13. He was accompanied by his roommate Kinuhata Saiai, a small girl wearing a knit dress.

"We really are getting relaxed with this," muttered Hamazura with his cheek resting on his hand while he used a straw to mix around a café au lait filled with way too much tapioca. "We started secretly guarding Fremea because we thought the remnants of the Freshmen might try another attack."

"Well, we did super defeat the pillars of the organization, Kuroyoru and Silver Cross. And it seems there are no members who plan to super attack out of emotional revenge after their logical attack plan failed. The odds are super low anything will happen now."

"But shouldn't we still be taking this a little more seriously? For example, we shouldn't be spending the whole time staring at movie magazines!!"

"I super can't decide whether to choose 'The Fiery Indian Cook Runs through New York' or 'Saitama☆Vocal Crisis'. Ah, dammit! I've heard you super can't see the graffiti on the walls during the dark scenes of Vocal unless you watch it in super high quality, but none of the big theaters are showing it!!"

"You chose to eat curry, so are you leaning toward that Indian one? …Come to think of it, why are you eating curry in a café? You really aren't taking this seriously."

“You say that, but aren't you super worse with how you always try to pair up with Takitsubo-san for these protection missions!? Do you super realize that someone’s life is on the line here!?”

Hamazura and Kinuhata began grappling (this primarily took the form of Kinuhata’s small hands turning Hamazura’s face even uglier), but they had a good reason for being so relaxed.

Namely…

“This Fremea girl has that rhinoceros beetle super attached to her backpack, right? Can’t we super end this routine work already?”

“Ghgyarbgyar!!”

“…? Super what are you trying to say, Hamazura?”

“You're pulling my gums out!!”

Hamazura began using all his strength to put out an SOS as the transformation to his face by Kinuhata’s fingers began leaving the realm of humanity.

Kinuhata let go with a sigh of annoyance, but Hamazura was unsure if his face had actually returned to normal.

And then…

Something happened outside the café window. All light left the many windows in the student dorm across the street. Only the dorm supervisor’s room on the first floor was still lit.

Hamazura checked the time on his cell phone.

“8:30 PM. Lights out. Nothing out of the ordinary today either.”

“Then let’s super head home.”

Hamazura and Kinuhata stood up and began grappling once more over who would pay the bill. Once more, Hamazura’s face was made even uglier.

And then…

Hamazura saw a bright light out of the corner of his eye.

He and Kinuhata looked out the window and saw one dorm room turn its light back on despite lights out having passed. After a few dozen seconds, the light disappeared once more.

The light had been from Fremea Seivelun’s room.

The two exchanged a glance.

“She forgot to do her homework.”

“She was super double-checking on what was in her backpack.”

“She spotted a roach.”

“She had a super bad dream.”

They gave various speculations, but they of course still did not know the answer.

After thinking for a bit, Kinuhata pulled out her phone.

Hamazura frowned and asked, “Hey, wait. Do you really have to go that far?”

“We know that Fremea is still super awake. This will super not be a bother.”

Kinuhata scrolled through her address book and called Fremea’s phone.

But after holding the phone to her ear for about 10 seconds, she frowned and took it away from her ear.

“…What’s wrong?”

“She super isn’t answering.”

Kinuhata hung up once she received an automatic announcement.

The look in her eyes switched over to one befitting a bloody world.

“As I said before, we know she is still super awake, but she super isn’t answering her phone. We need to assume something super happened.”

Kinuhata grabbed the bill, slammed it against Hamazura’s face, and then rushed out of the café.

By the time Hamazura paid the bill and caught up, something else had happened.

“What is that noise?”

It was not an electronic tone. What sounded like a distant fire alarm was carried in on the night wind. This must have caused a commotion because lights began turning back on in the student dorm.

“Is that a fire alarm? …No, it’s the alarm to an emergency exit.”

“Meaning?”

“Either someone has forced their way in or someone left.”

Kinuhata and Hamazura exchanged a glance.

Either option was bad news.

“But…what about the rhinoceros beetle? I thought Fremea had the #2 as her bodyguard!? No normal attacker would stand a chance!!”

“Super don’t ask me! We need to super check on the situation for ourselves!!”

Part 3

Hamazura and Kinuhata had overlooked one simple possibility.

This is what happened a few minutes before the emergency door alarm went off.

“Homework: check! PE uniform: check! My knife and fork are in there, too! Nyah, nyah. My preparations for tomorrow are perfect!!”

Fremea Seivelun checked on her possessions while peering into her red backpack. She was in her dorm room and wearing pajamas. She was speaking out loud because she had been scolded by her teacher that morning for forgetting her homework.

The white rhinoceros beetle key chain on her desk then stirred slightly.

The smoother outer shell on his back opened up and wings so thin they looked translucent spread out. The wings vibrated the air such that they created an artificial voice.

“Did you make sure to put your toothbrush set inside?”

“N-nyah! In the first place, I was just getting to that!!” frantically replied Fremea as she tossed a narrow cylindrical plastic case into her backpack. “All done!”

“Excellent.”

Lights out would soon arrive. The rhinoceros beetle used his six small legs to move from the desk to the windowsill. Fremea must have suddenly felt tired after finishing her final task for the night because she began rubbing her eyes sleepily as she watched the beetle.

“Nyah. You could always stay here.”

“I cannot do that,” replied the beetle while sticking his horn into the crack between the window and the windowsill.

As he used his horn to widen that gap and create an exit, Fremea tried to grab him, but then a red light flashed on the room’s wall clock. That signified lights out.

Fremea frantically ran to her bed.

If she did not know where the bed was, it was all over. A nightlight was allowed after lights out (and it could be kept on all night), but that was the sign of a coward.

As soon as she jumped onto her bed, the lights went out.

She could still dimly see the windowsill due to the lights outside. She turned toward it and spoke.

“Nyah. Good night.”

“Good night. See you tomorrow.”

But just after the rhinoceros beetle finished speaking…

A sound like a thin piece of ice cracking could be heard.

It had come from the beetle. It had been loud enough for Fremea to hear it from the other side of the room. The beetle standing on the windowsill with his six legs then rolled off and dropped to the floor. It happened much too easily.

“Nyah, nyah? In the first place, what’s wrong!? Are you okay!?”

If she turned on the fluorescent light after lights out, she would be scolded by the dorm supervisor, but that fact had completely left Fremea’s mind.

She turned on the light and ran to the windowsill.

The rhinoceros beetle was still lying on his back with his six legs twitching. Cracks were running through him, but it seemed unlikely they were from the impact of the fall. It looked more like it was the cracks that had caused the fall.

(Not…good…)

The beetle desperately tried to open the outer shell on his back to spread his thin wings.

He was trying to create his artificial voice.

(Someone is interfering…with the Dark Matter…? I do not know who is doing this…or how…but their draw…is very powerful!!)

However, the beetle was not trying to inform Fremea of his symptoms or to ask for help.

He was trying to do the opposite.

(The damage is focused on my outer shell. I detect no intent to target my weak spots at the joints and sensory organs… That means the enemy is trying to let others know that I am injured. The enemy is trying to concern Fremea Seivelun so she will leave the room on her own!)

“Kssshhhhhhh!!”

The rhinoceros beetle gathered all his strength to move his body and vibrate his wings, but he only produced a sort of static.

This failed voice only concerned the girl further.

The method was the same as a sniper shooting out the legs of an enemy soldier to draw in other soldiers who tried to help the first one. The beetle only now realized that the enemy had been expecting him to let out that “scream”.

He was meant to produce a state of panic.

That panic would remove Fremea’s thought patterns from their normal rails.

“Nyah…nyah! What should I do? Call an ambulance? …But he’s a beetle, so maybe I need a vet. Do they heal bugs? A-anyway, I have to do something!”

“…No…stop…Kssshhh!! Kkkssshhhh!!”

His warning did not reach her.

Just as the enemy wanted, Fremea scooped the beetle up into her arms.

“Hamazura… Nyah! That’s right! Hamazura! Ahh! *Why does he never answer when it’s important!* Nyah, nyah!!”

She changed into her outdoor clothes and charged out of her safe room.

Her plan was to meet up with Hamazura Shiage to discuss the problem.

Academy City’s #2 was supposed to be a powerful bodyguard protecting Fremea Seivelun, but he had instead been used as a tool to drag her down into the darkness.

And then a high-pitched alarm blared to indicate the emergency door had been opened.

The enemy had not needed to send an attacker to harm Fremea.

They had merely needed to have her move to the target destination.

Part 4

Fate took effect.

A girl who could be called the exact opposite of Fremea Seivelun was dragged up onto the stage.

“Shit!!” swore Kuroyoru Umidori with her back leaning up against a building in a District 13 alley.

She was a Level 4 who could control nitrogen as well as a cyborg who had remade a portion of her body with a focus on her arms. She had once controlled the new darkness of Academy City known as the Freshmen, but she was now preparing for the return of that group by working to repair the connections that had been torn apart back then.

To put it simply, she was performing jobs for higher ups in the city.

This job should have been simple. She was aiding a VIP in one of their occasional moves from one stronghold to another. She did not know if it was in the form of checks or bonds, but she had to move the “money” in an attaché case from the old stronghold to the new. This was obviously something that could not be allowed to get out, but she was used to handling this sort of thing.

However…

“Goddamn them. It was empty from the beginning!”

By the time she had noticed something was off and broken the attaché case’s lock, it was too late. There was nothing inside. It had not been lost en route; nothing had ever been inside. And she had not been used as a diversion as was common when transporting cash.

She was being framed.

The VIP who had given Kuroyoru the job would soon officially accuse her in the form of an assassin. The VIP would demand she return the money she stole in order to cheat her out of a large sum of money. The entire job had been a lie. The very agreement over who would be paying who had been a lie.

(But that’s fine. Now that I know I can’t use this connection, I have plenty of other ways to use this. I just need to find people who are afraid of this VIP or people who want her dead. I can create several different connections from this.)

Her power was only effective at close range, but she possessed the destructive power to slice a tank in half.

Even her thought patterns were dyed in the colors of offense.

“Don’t make me fucking laugh, Yakumi. Thanks for the opportunity. I’ll tie a ribbon around your head and use it as the foundation for the Freshmen’s revival.”

And then…

She heard soft footsteps approaching.

From the way the person was carrying their weight, this was not a professional. However, Kuroyoru did not let her guard down. An amateur could still kill. Their cell phone's camera might have been taken over to send target data to a sniper or they could be carrying liquid nitrogen without knowing it. Those who relaxed when up against a child or the elderly would not live long. They would just end up being killed by a child or the elderly.

Finally, a "girl" showing no sign of caution appeared.

"Ny-nyah! In the first place, where is Hamazura!?"

(…Her?)

It was Fremea Seivelun.

She had been the target the Freshmen had once tried to crush to achieve their goal. However, it had been Silver Cross Alpha who had actually taken action to abduct Fremea and he had used various types of powered suits and unmanned weapons. Fremea had never actually seen Kuroyoru.

And so…

The girl showed no concern when she saw Kuroyoru Umidori in that alley.

In fact…

Fremea was more concerned with a strange noise coming from deeper in the alley. It sounded like several metal pieces grinding together.

Kuroyoru could think of only one possibility.

"Yakumi Hisako's assassin," spat out Kuroyoru as she kicked away the empty attaché case at her feet.

She did not know what exactly happened to the metal case after it flew into the darkness of the alley in a parabolic arc. She could only hear a great din that was not quite sounds of destruction and not quite sounds of chewing.

"Ee!" shrieked Fremea as she stood paralyzed with fear.

Kuroyoru ignored her and glared into the alley. Someone was walking their way.

From the clothes, it appeared to be a nurse.

However, the look in this nurse's eyes showed that she did the opposite of "save" lives. Her long hair was worn up to keep it tidy, her fingernails were cut short with no manicure, and her other outward characteristics were just

as focused on being hygienic. This made her look very plain, but the look in her eyes was anything but plain.

The nametag on her chest said Rensa.

It was unclear whether this was her family name or given name.

Very few people would want to give away their identity on a field of killing, so this was either a fake name or a declaration that she would kill everyone here.

"*I will collect the money later,*" Rensa said to Kuroyoru with a sharp glare before turning her gaze to Fremea who stood behind Kuroyoru. "Fremea Seivelun spotted. The situation is progressing well. Given the difference in priority, I am setting her capture as my primary objective."

Kuroyoru had not even the slightest obligation to protect Fremea.

If she had been the type of person who would risk her own life to protect a strange girl, she would not have chosen to give herself into the darkness and she would not have decided it was a comfortable place to be.

However…

"Is that supposed to be a joke? Your terrible sense of humor is the only thing laughable here," spat out Kuroyoru as she held her right hand forward. A nitrogen spear appeared from her palm. "Don't underestimate the Freshmen. You assumed trust was more important to me than money. That was a mistake. A terrible mistake. You want to know what's top priority here? *It's killing you!!*"

"…The situation is progressing well."

A smile appeared on Rensa's face. It was so small it was hard to tell anything had changed.

The smile seemed even less human than the lack of expression from before.

"The artificial protection target has even shown enough control over her enemy to create a dark hero variation. Everything is progressing as expected."

"…What?"

"Just to clarify, I am not taking the Freshmen lightly or making any erroneous assumptions," continued Rensa at a constant slow rate. "The Freshmen were only created to input set values of fear, anger, and joy into Fremea Seivelun's mind. In other words, you were the villains who were intended to fail. From that perspective, you played the command role near perfectly. *You lost perfectly.*"

“I take it you want me to kill you?”

Kuroyoru Umidori lowered her body slightly.

After shifting her timing just a bit, Kuroyoru charged toward Rensa. After drawing her opponent’s focus to the spear in her right hand, she extinguished it and produced a new nitrogen spear from her left hand. Drawing the eye like that was the basis of stage magic. It only gave her 0.5 seconds, but that was more than enough.

She moved to decapitate the girl.

Kuroyoru swung the left spear up and across toward Rensa’s head. Rensa stood perfectly still as the nitrogen spear approached in a crescent moon trajectory.

And then Kuroyoru Umidori’s Bomber Lance was immediately stopped.

Rensa had produced a transparent nitrogen spear of her own from her palm.

“Wha-…?”

Kuroyoru gasped.

Her powers had been developed in the Dark May Project. There were others who used nitrogen powers, but Kuroyoru had never seen anyone else who could produce spears with nitrogen. Rensa was clearly using the same power as Kuroyoru.

“The situation is progressing well.” Despite the two of them being in a situation similar to locking swords, Rensa’s expression did not change. “The dark hero ball has indeed been influenced by the cue that is the artificial protection target. It should be possible to create a collision between her and a normal hero. Agitate Halation’s usefulness has-…”

“Shut the fuck up!!” shouted Kuroyoru as she intentionally extinguished the spear in her left hand and bent her upper body to avoid Rensa’s spear which continued forcefully toward her.

When Rensa lost balance, Kuroyoru held both palms toward her.

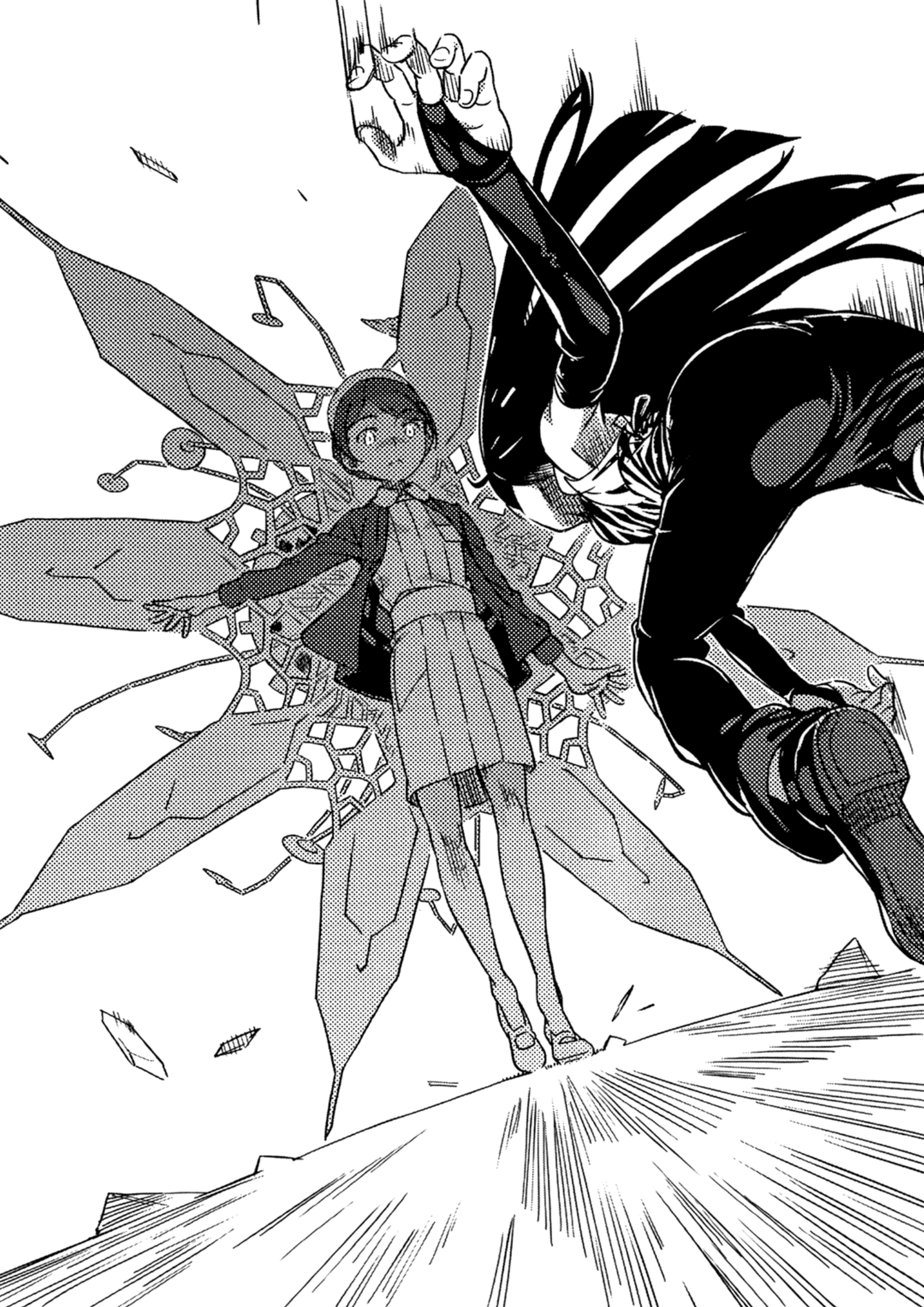
If she fired two more Bomber Lances from those palms, it would all be over.

The girl could not defend this time.

Even if she could use the same Bomber Lance as Kuroyoru, Rensa’s stance prevented her from using the spears to defend.

However…

Something else happened.



Kuroyoru heard an odd sound as if multiple piece of metal were scraping together.

(What…?)

She felt as if the world had entered slow motion as some strange object burst from Rensa's back. It was a giant metallic red flower accompanied by countless silver metal rods that looked like the flower's stamen and pistil.

Was she equipped with some next generation weapon based in strange cutting edge technology?

Had she built it into her body like Kuroyoru's former colleague Silver Cross Alpha?

(No…)

Kuroyoru Umidori, who had remade a portion of her body to artificially transfer the meaning of her existence, felt an unclassified, unscientific, vivid, and primitive "bad feeling".

(This can't be…no…it can't be…!!)

With another metallic noise, the giant flower that expanded from Rensa's back folded back up into her nurse uniform. The cloth had not been torn because the back had been made with a special hole.

The entire process had only taken 0.7 seconds.

Kuroyoru was unable to take action based on her "bad feeling". She could not even cancel the action she had already started to take. Bomber Lances burst from the palms pointed toward Rensa's upper body.

And she already knew that this was a fatal mistake.

The instant the nitrogen spears touched Rensa's body, they burst to pieces and caused a large explosion.

"Ah…bh!?"

Kuroyoru Umidori stopped breathing.

When she lost control of her power, it became a small bomb. The torrent of nitrogen expanding with tremendous force had struck Kuroyoru like someone had tossed a grenade at her chest in the same way one passed a basketball.

Rensa had used some method to defend.

However, Bomber Lance could not accomplish what she had done.

She had ignored the "palm" restriction and reflected the offensive ability when it had touched any part of her body.

(Reflection…? But then…!!)

The power that could accomplish that was…

(Vector…control…? It can't be… It can't be!! Is she using the powers of the #1 who my offensive thought patterns are based on…!?)

There was a project known as Five Over.

It had attempted to reproduce the phenomena caused by the seven Level 5s registered within Academy City by using macro engineering technology instead of micro quantum mechanics. Her former colleague Silver Cross had used a powered suit with Gatling gun ability which had borne the name of the #3's Five Over.

However…

(No. If I'm right, this goes well beyond having the #1's Five Over installed in her! This bitch has-…!!)

With the same unpleasant metallic noise, that giant scientific flower opened and closed once more from the back of Rensa's nurse uniform and cardigan.

It was as if she was loading the next round in a pump-action shotgun.

After being knocked back by her own spear exploding, Kuroyoru could only watch as Rensa gracefully turned on one leg. She rotated 180 degrees to point her cardigan-covered back toward the other girl.

"Gh…!!!???"

Pure white wings burst out of her back. Instead of a simple strike, it was more like hundreds of sharp stakes had been shot at her. Kuroyoru produced spears from both hands and desperately tried to defend, but she did not make it in time. Kuroyoru's powers had been modified to be offensive, so they were ill-suited to defend. The white stakes wove between the spears and unhesitatingly struck Kuroyoru's upper body.

This time, Rensa had produced a white material.

This was Academy City's #2.

This was Dark Matter.

(I get it… Does that giant flower rearrange her interior!?)

"Bhh!? …Gah…!!"

That was all it took to make her start coughing up blood.

This was not a mere machine.

However, it was also not the same as the psychic powers using quantum mechanics that Academy City had developed.

Kuroyoru's ability to control nitrogen was upwards compatible with the #1's ability to control all vectors. In other words, his power could reproduce her power.

However, the #1 and the #2 were obviously completely different. No matter how much either one tried to reproduce the other's power, they would never be able to fully do so.

That meant this girl could at least use two powers of two completely different types.

And that was only at the very least.

This created a contradiction with the Dual Skill barrier. A single human brain should not have been able to possess more than one power.

And yet…

(You monster… You monster!! At this rate, I doubt this will end at just two. And yet each individual power is too great a factor for me to handle head on!!)

She did not have time to lie around on the ground. She upped the output of her spears further. She swung her arms around like they were boosters to keep her balance and then jumped straight up into the air. She kicked off the walls a few times and made her way up to the roof.

She heard the same metallic noise from below.

Rensa was changing her attack method.

And then Rensa's orderly voice said, "Hypothesized Catastrophe 034… 'Countermeasure in Case All Seven Level 5s in Academy City Opposed the Board of Directors Simultaneously.' That is why I was created. In other words, *I have been given the power needed to defeat all seven Level 5s on my own.* Please do not think you can escape with such a foolish plan."

Kuroyoru then heard a much quieter metallic noise.

It sounded like someone flicking a coin with their thumb.

The Level 5 this brought to mind was…

"Railgun!?" shouted Kuroyoru.

In the same instant, the darkness of the night was ripped apart by an orange beam of light.

Part 5

They heard an explosion.

District 13 was much more silent than an entertainment district, so they could almost feel the commotion forming. It felt like they could tell exactly where in the district the explosion had occurred.

Hamazura Shiage and Kinuhata Saiai had entered Fremea's student dorm to gather information. However, they had not snuck in, broken a window to get in, or anything like that. The emergency door alarm had gone off, so they had simply knocked on the front door asking if they needed help or needed someone to call Anti-Skill.

According to the dorm supervisor, there was no fear of a fire or robber and the resident Anti-Skill member was in the process of checking to make sure all of the students were present. In other words, they had learned nothing.

They had heard the explosion while in the middle of that.

The blast was so loud they thought the windows might have shattered had the explosion been just a bit closer.

"You've gotta be kidding me. That has nothing to do with Fremea, right!?"

"It may have super nothing to do with her, but we mustn't underestimate her ability to get wrapped up in trouble."

Hamazura and Kinuhata told the flustered dorm supervisor to finish checking on the students as quickly as possible and to seal the exits so no one could leave. They then ran toward the site of the blast.

"Will she really listen to what some super suspicious people told her?"

"Whether she does or not, the kids aren't allowed out past lights out. And if Fremea really has disappeared, the teachers are going to be nervous too."

Due to the great commotion, even a monkey would have known where the site of the blast was.

There was no flood of curious onlookers because District 13 was filled with elementary school students who were strictly prohibited from going out at night.

"But what's with this timing? Sure, we were being cautious, but there wasn't any sign of the Freshmen trying to reform, was there!?"

"Let's see, the Freshmen are super definitely the top suspect, but we need to super assume they are not the only ones lurking in Academy City."

And then…

They heard an odd sizzling sound.

It was similar to an insect being fried by a bug zapper, but they could not see one anywhere.

“Hey, wait, wait!” shouted a sugary female voice.

They saw a woman in her thirties wearing the white coat of a researcher. She must not have been used to exerting herself because she was out of breath just from jogging a bit.

As she gasped for breath, she said, “It would be a biiit of a problem if you continued on up ahead. Hm, I suppose you would be the easiest hero to draw in using Fremea Seivelun.”

“…What?”

“…”

Hamazura frowned at that nonsensical statement, but Kinuhata was more focused on their surroundings. She was looking around cautiously.

Meanwhile, the woman continued, “Hmm, this is a problem. By their nature, a hero won’t listen if you tell them not to go help. Aaand that’s why I won’t try that. …*I’ll give you a more convincing reason to give up.*”

A sound like zapping electricity rang out.

Orange sparks flew from the gap of the hood on a car parked in a nearby parking lot. And it did not stop there. Sounds of electricity continued from all over.

The woman gave a crescent moon-shaped smile while standing in that nighttime street.

“You know that bugs in computers and the like are called that because of real bugs, right?”

“…”

“Real bugs would crawl into the circuits and cause the machine to malfunction. Nowww, a question: Why would I be explaining this in such an ominous setting? Heh heh heh hah hah!!”

Sparks flew from the traffic lights, the vending machines, the outdoor speakers used to announce the time during the day, the emergency public phones, and every other electronic device along the street.

“…They’re here. Hamazura, they’re super here! We’re super surrounded!!”

When Kinuhata said that, Hamazura finally turned his gaze away from the creepy woman.

A manhole lid was being lifted up. He thought he saw a dark liquid pouring out, but that was not what it was. It was not actually anything that unusual. The problem was the overwhelming numbers.

“What the hell…!? Roaches!?”

“Don’t worry. Unlike the German or American cockroaches, this kind doesn’t eat garbage. These are the giant cockroaches found in forests and jungles that chew through wood. By the way, roaches have the same evolutionary roots as termites. And. That. Means. They already have the teeth they need to tear through flesh and bones.”

Hearing that did nothing to eliminate the physiological sense of disgust.

One roach was bad enough, but the mere sight of hundreds or even thousands of them was enough to violently assault Hamazura’s vision like a weapon.

“And did you know that an insect’s brain structure is simple enough for a bit of psychosurgery to make them to want to eat anything and everything? These days, we don’t even have to open up their heads. We can just destroy the cells we want with a neutron beam. Oh, but we did put some forethought into this. No actual genetic alterations have been made, so if they escape and reproduce, their children will not be able to eat people.”

In other words, they were man-eating roaches.

The food chain had been reversed. This seemed less like a cutting-edge weapon that carried out optimized destruction and more like harassment meant to lower the enemy’s morale for the smallest cost.

“Oh, and they can eat a lot more than just human flesh. They can eat wood. They can eat stone. They can eat rubber, metal, glass, and plastic. If you try to run off and hide, they’ll just eat through the building, so be careful.”

Part 6

Night had already fallen. The curfew had passed, so the trains and busses had stopped. Kamijou Touma was running from District 3 to District 13. Those behind the Agitate Halation project had set Fremea Seivelun at the center of the project. It was possible they were going to attack her at any moment.

However…

(Where is this Fremea girl’s dorm?)

Kamijou was running toward District 13, but he did not know specifically where to go.

(It'll be in District 13. That much I know. That time I let Birdway into my dorm, this girl was there too. I remember greeting her, but was there more than that? Did she ever give any specifics about her school or her dorm?)

She may have and she may not have. He did not remember. At that point, Kamijou recalled the cell phone in his pocket. Index had a perfect memory, so she would remember any trivial comment Fremea might have made. If Fremea had said something in a conversation or even muttered to herself, Index would not have overlooked it.

However, Kamijou did not pull out his cell phone.

Something else happened before he could.

A nearby roadside tree was suddenly sliced apart diagonally.

"...!!"

The attack had come from behind. Kamijou frantically ducked down, but after the fact. If the "blade" that had been swung sideways had been just a few centimeters lower, Kamijou's skull would have been sliced through.

Something like raindrops dripped onto his head.

(What? Was that a water jet!?)

He quickly turned around.

He saw a large empty pedestrian scramble. Empty, that is, except for a single person standing in the center of it. She wore the outfit of a bunny girl which showed off her sensual feminine body lines, but that sex appeal was countered by a paper bag worn over the head. That was strange enough, but she was also using both hands to hold something at her hips.

It resembled a naginata.

It appeared to be made of a combination of carbon and plastic.

However, a hose-like object was connected to the bottom of the grip.

She wore a tank filled with water on her back like a backpack.

(Wait, is that enough to explain this? The water jets used to cut steel sheets in factories need a gigantic machine to cut the steel just a few centimeters away. She used that from easily over 10 meters away!!)

Was it a pure machine tool?

Or was some sort of esper ability involved?

The answer to that could make a world of difference in how useful Kamijou Touma's right hand would be.

"Nyan nyaka nyan, nyan nyaka nyan, nyan nyan nyan nyan nyaaan☆"

She sang mockingly.

And the song had nothing at all to do with rabbits.

Kamijou had been so preoccupied by her strange outfit and weapon, that he had forgotten something important.

"…What? Who are you!? Why are you targeting me!?"

"Nyan!?"

The head under the paper bag tilted slightly.

She replied while shaking her hips so seductively it became creepy.

"Well, you. You there. Can't you hear it?"

"Hear what…?"

"The voiceless voice." Something inside her head seemed to switch over as the paper bag spoke. "There are idiots out there who will call you self-righteous for choosing to fight if the person never asked for help. Those people really are stupid. They can't relax until they've gotten in other people's way just to give an excuse for not helping. They're hopeless. Just so, so hopeless. When I see people like that, it makes me want to slice them in two like a samurai."

This made no sense.

She seemed to have a fairly developed set of principles, so what was she doing here? An intense feeling of something being out of place came over Kamijou. It was like someone had brought in a piece from a different jigsaw puzzle because one was missing from the proper puzzle.

Yes.

It was like a weapon that had no one to protect yet would still destroy any enemy that fit the proper parameters.

"They don't want my help? I don't care. No one wants me to do this? I don't care! Saving them like this won't make anyone happy? I! Don't! Care!! …I just need to listen to the voiceless voice. I just need to save those I want to save! That's what it means to be a*hero*!!"

Kamijou felt an unpleasant sensation run down his spine. Why would she use that term here?

“It’s pounding in my head. The voiceless voice is telling me she’s afraid! That she’s in pain! And so I will save *Fremea Seivelun*. I already know she is being targeted. I have no way of knowing who is an enemy and who is an ally, so hmm…I guess the only way to find the assassin is to crush every single other person☆!!”

As she shouted out psychedelically, she sprayed a blade of ultra-high pressure water from the tip of the naginata. She lazily lowered the tip and the water blade tore into the asphalt.

“What…?” said Kamijou without thinking.

No one should have known what route he was taking from District 3 to District 13. In fact, no one should have known that he was heading toward Fremea. However, that was not the issue he had with this.

Why had an attacker who knew about Fremea appeared with this timing?

It was as if she had some card he had to take from her by defeating her.

“I don’t know how far Agitate Halation has progressed, but is this Fremea’s influence? But that doesn’t make any-…!!”

“I don’t care about your complaints. Fnyah hah hah!! Let’s settle this with our fists! Let’s go for a fistfight! Heh…If I die, make sure to protect Fremea. Just kidding!!”

Kamijou could not allow himself to be held up here, but that water jet naginata could be turned toward him at any moment.

He held his right fist up at the ready.

And then the bunny girl wearing a paper bag was sent flying through the air due to a blow from the side.

Kamijou had not done a thing.

A new intruder announced their presence with a deep sound that Kamijou felt in his gut like in a live music club.

(Was that an explosive blast? No, or just an explosive noise? Was it some kind of shockwave!?)

Four large trucks slowly came to a stop, filling one entire corner of the pedestrian scramble. They were the advertisement trucks that drove around announcing an artist’s new song. The four trucks lined up with two on either side and someone walked up along the center line between them.

With the bright headlights behind the person, all Kamijou could see was a dark shadow.

As his eyes adjusted to the light, he managed to make out that the shadow had the silhouette of a girl.

Gradually, he realized she was the person who had put together the group of trucks.

She wore a bikini top and baggy pants. She was so lightly dressed one almost forgot this was a November night. Her clothes looked more like a stage outfit than personal clothes. The girl was holding what looked like a megaphone but was actually a wireless microphone connected to the giant speakers loaded on the advertisement trucks.

That sweet candy-like voice burst through the night at such loud volume that it felt like an explosive blast.

“Ladiiiiiies aaand gentlemeeeeeeeeeen!! Thank you for coming to today's Fusou Ayame punishment conceeeerrrrrrrrttttttt!!”

“What the hell are you doing!?”

Kamijou yelled with his hands over his ears, but he was not sure his voice had reached her. The great noise seemed to shake his skull more than his eardrums and Fusou Ayame, the girl who had sent the paper bag bunny flying, made various exaggerated gestures as she spoke.

“Here are today’s guest performers!! They are the uncertain elements trying to get near *Fremea Seivelun*! Tah dah! It’s time for the bloody sudden death concert you’ve all come to expect! Let’s keep going all night looooooonnnnnnnnnggggggggggg!!!!!!”

At that point, high-pitched static as if from feedback mixed in with the already violently-loud flood of noise.

However, Fusou Ayame had not made some sort of mistake.

One of the four large trucks had been sliced in two by an ultra-high pressure water jet.

Kamijou looked over and saw the bunny girl unsteadily standing up from where she had been knocked by the shockwave that had likely been created by an esper ability to amplify noise and give it directionality. She must have coughed up some blood because the paper bag was tinged red around the mouth. Nevertheless, it still looked like she was smiling eerily.

“Don’t! Make! Me! Laugh!! The voiceless voice is the guide to salvation. If you claim to be a hero, why are you trying to crush iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiittttttttttttttttttttttttttttt!?”

Fusou Ayame gave an impressed whistle followed by, “Thank you very much for getting so into your performaaaaaaannnnnnce!! Now that

everyone's warmed up, let's get the first song started. It's time to dance until your heart buuuuuurrrrrrsssssssssts!!"

It almost seemed the person behind the Agitate Halation project had sent assassins to stop Kamijou who was on his way to Fremea. Just like they had placed the ball named Kamijou on the table to knock the inconvenient ball named Tsuchimikado into the pocket.

But that was not what was happening.

The balls that had collided here were the paper bag bunny girl and Fusou Ayame.

(Agitate Halation gives Fremea the "attribute" of a protection target so those controlling the project can freely send any heroes in the city to defeat each other.)

"Tonight's guest performer is putting up quite the fight☆ But I have the overwhelming advantage when it comes to reach! Can she put on an even more exciting show just by swinging around that machine toooooooooooooooooollllllllllll!?"

"Hah! If you know it's a machine tool, then maybe you should be more cautious!!"

The water jet sliced through the road, the signs, and cars parked on the side of the road.

No, it did more than slice through them.

The systematically sliced-off pieces fit together perfectly like the parts of a plastic model and formed a giant crossbow that was three meters long.

"This is the siege weapon known as a ballista!! I just have to make whatever I don't have! This easily fills in my range weakness!!"

With another impressed whistle, the other girl said, "Preparing a machine on the fly like that is quite the ad liiiiiiiiibbbbbbbb!!"

Kamijou thought while blankly watching the two heroes clash.

(That would mean all the balls involved here are trying to work to Fremea's advantage. But is that really what's happening? Is a third party using Fremea as the cue to control everyone on the billiards table?)

Was that the person behind Agitate Halation?

Was that Yakumi Hisako of the board of directors?

But…

(In that case, it's odd that the heroes aren't focusing on me. In fact, it's odd that I'm here at all. I was originally sent to eliminate Tsuchimikado Motoharu for them. According to that old man, I was supposed to be eliminated by some bacteria. So where did things go wrong? In fact, *who is truly controlling Agitate Halation!?*)

Kamijou Touma was still there.

And the heroes were not ganging up on him.

A great roar exploded out. Something had happened between the paper bag bunny girl and Fusou Ayame. With a whooshing sound, something fell down toward Kamijou's head.

He caught it and found it was a cell phone.

He opened it and checked on its contents. The owner may have done some independent research because it listed the location of Fremea Seivelun's student dorm.

(This is too convenient.)

The two girls were so focused on fighting that they paid no heed to Kamijou's actions.

He thought while quietly leaving.

(*But convenient for who?* I doubt it's for Fremea Seivelun or the person controlling her behind the scenes. Where is this project being controlled? Who is leading me around!?)

Part 7

"Pant…pant…"

Kuroyoru Umidori lay on her back on top of a five-story building. Her right eye kept blinking. Her right arm had been ripped off at the upper arm. Instead of flesh and blood, glittering silver pieces of framework and cables were strewn about.

She could not calculate the level of damage.

She could not grasp how much power remained within her.

She felt like wires had been stabbed into the center of her body and were stirring up everything inside. Only her right arm had actually been attacked, and yet her entire body cried out in pain.

(God fucking dammit… The #1, the #2, and even the #3… That monster is called Rensa, right? This goes beyond Dual Skill. Each individual ability is so powerful it hardly matters she can use more than one!!)

While she still felt the pain, her fear had numbed over. That showed just how little she understood the situation and how confused she was. She tried to move, but her three remaining limbs only trembled.

She heard a soft sound.

She turned her unnaturally trembling head just in time to see the nurse named Rensa stepping up onto the edge of the rooftop.

"…"

Kuroyoru had not come up with any sort of plan.

She was not even sure if there was any plan she could possibly come up with.

Kuroyoru's missing right arm was held in Rensa's mouth. She had caught it there after shooting it off. That was all that meant.

It was nothing more than a victory prize.

Once she was done with that psychological harassment she had carried out on a whim, Rensa did not hesitate to spit the severed arm to the side.

"The situation is progressing well. I am glad to see you are not dead. Your death would be a problem."

"…?"

"I will not kill you," said Rensa with no change of expression.

With a metallic noise, the giant flower-like object shot from her back and then shot back in.

"I can produce this Bomber Lance from my hand. If I decapitate Fremea Seivelun with this, *who will all the heroes think did it?*"

"Heh…" Kuroyoru laughed despite the sweat covering her body. "So you needed a convenient villain you're fine with them ganging up on? Then why bother with all this? You could have just given me the job. You could have told me to go kill that Fremea brat in exchange for bringing back the Freshmen."

"The end result is the same either way."

She had pursued Kuroyoru rather than Fremea in order to prevent any possible alibis. It would be a problem if Kuroyoru was with someone else while Rensa killed Fremea. That was the only reason.

“But why do you want to kill Fremea? I thought she was so important you used the Freshmen as a stepping stone to reach her.”

“Agitate Halation is not Fremea Seivelun’s ability. External factors may have placed it within her, but the final stage lies beyond that.”

“In other words, now that this ability has been put in Fremea, something else will be completed when you kill her? It’s like you’re tearing her gut open to take out a baby.”

“I am glad you understand. This is an endurance test for mass production. After seeing how far we must go for the artificial protection target to die, we will create a birdcage to control the target. …Is that a problem?”

“Not really.”

Kuroyoru Umidori had no reason to actively protect Fremea Seivelun.

Nor did she have any reason to get along with those around Fremea.

If they wanted to hate her, they were free to do so. It did not matter if it was based in revenge for something she had actually done or if it was a grudge they had artificially been led to hold. The darkness held enough benefit, pleasure, and freedom for her to endure it.

“If that’s what you’re gonna do, then do it.”

“Then I shall.”

“But.” Kuroyoru paused for a second. “*You made a mistake when you took my severed arm with you.*”

“?”

“You gave me exactly what I needed to break the Tengu’s long nose. I’m not gonna pass up a chance like this even if I have no real reason!!”

The explosive sound of a nitrogen spear appearing could be heard.

However, it did not come from Kuroyoru’s left palm.

It came from the severed mechanical arm Rensa had spat at her feet not long before.

“I can control it remotely! As long as the palm remains, I can still use it as an output point for my powers! Did you forget that, you lowly thug!?”

With no body to hold it in place, the right arm began rotating on the spot like a pinwheel firework. And Rensa was standing right next to it.

Kuroyoru created another Bomber Lance from her left hand.

Due to the tremendous damage she had taken, she could not even stand. For that reason, she used the nitrogen spear like a booster to blast herself toward Rensa. She balled up her body in midair and swung the spear around as she rotated.

She attacked with both her right and her left hand.

Even with one of those hands no longer attached to her body, she succeeded in the simultaneous attack.

And…

(You may have multiple methods of attack, but there's a slight lag when you switch between them. That means you're vulnerable to surprise attacks!!)

Rensa immediately produced identical nitrogen spears to Kuroyoru's from both her palms. This may have been based in the thought patterns created to kill the seven Level 5s. Her strategy may have been to respond with the same power as her opponent when unsure what to do.

The four spears clashed.

Rensa must not have wanted to give Kuroyoru any time to recover because she quickly detonated her own nitrogen spears. That was usually not a very effective attack, but Kuroyoru was in midair and her severed right arm was out of control. In other words, she could not brace herself. The explosion blasted Kuroyoru's body and right arm in different directions.

"Gh…!!" gasped Kuroyoru as her back slammed into hard concrete.

Her attacks had not reached Rensa.

(But she detonated the spears at close range without using the #1's reflection. That blast must have hit her too!!)

While collapsed on the ground, Kuroyoru adjusted her position slightly to look over at Rensa.

She grinned.

It was a villainous, hideous, twisted, mocking, and thin, thin smile.

"…I was…right…"

She heard a flapping noise.

It was the sound of the ripped fabric of the nurse uniform and cardigan being blown about in the night wind.

The hair Rensa had worn up in a plain style for hygienic reasons had spread out. It seemed to follow the smooth ups and downs of her skin.

The true meaning hidden in this enemy lay there.

“That…that right there is what makes you…what makes people call you a monster. That’s it. But once I know what it is, I can find a way to use it against you. I’m not to feeling my way blindly through a pitch-black minefield. No matter how many mines have been laid, I can walk safely through the minefield barefoot as long as I’ve marked them all with phosphorescent paint ahead of-…!!”

Kuroyoru trailed off.

She heard the metallic sound of Rensa switching out attack methods and then a tremendous attack sent her body flying through the air…and right off the edge of the building.

Part 8

The man-eating cockroaches slowly approached.

It was not just the one manhole lid being pushed up. Every manhole as far as they could see had countless shiny black insects pouring out of them.

Hamazura backed up without thinking, but that would not help in this situation.

Kinuhata faced forward and clicked her tongue while glaring at the woman in the lab coat.

“Hamazura, let’s super split up here.”

“What do you mean?”

“I super have Offense Armor. I can super create a wall of compressed nitrogen around my body. Even if those things super have the ability to chew through and digest flesh and bone, they super cannot reach my flesh.”

Was Kinuhata saying she would handle the man-eating roaches?

“But…!!”

“That’s a dangerous gamble,” cut in the woman in the lab coat. “These maaay not have the ability to eat through a wall of nitrogen, but are you sure that is the only way for them to get through? What if you were no longer able to create that wall? That would only leave your soft flesh.”

“You are only super enjoying trying to scare us. We don’t need to worry about that.”

“Are you sure?”

“The conditions are super identical for you,” said Kinuhata mockingly. “You are using all these man-eating roaches and yet there is no sign of them super attacking you. You must have something that super protects you and super sends orders to them. If I super get my hands on that, you will be in trouble. Being super eaten by your own swarm of roaches would be one super hell of a way to die.”

“…Kinuhata. Hey!!”

Hamazura tried to stop Kinuhata as she advanced the conversation on her own.

She silenced him with a quick glare.

“She super has some way of controlling all these man-eating roaches. She may be able to super attack in multiple places at once and she may have other pawns. …We super can’t leave Fremea-san unprotected. Hamazura, super go help her.”

The woman in the lab coat gave empty, mocking applause.

“Nee hee. Do you really think I’ll let you go?”

“We will super manage somehow. Now that I know their fangs can’t reach me, I can handle as super many of them as I need to.”

“Nee hee hee hee hee hee! Didn’t I say roaches and termites have the same evolutionary roots? So why do you think I chose roaches? Why not termites instead?”

Her cruelty began to erupt out.

“It was because roaches cause much more mental exhaustion. They affect your mind when you see them moving around and when you squish them! And whether they are performed consciously or subconsciously, Academy City’s esper powers require mental calculations. Will you make it to 100? Or 1000? Or maybe even an unthinkable 10,000? As you are squishing and squishing and squishing, what do you think will happen to your Personal Reality!?”

That explanation alone was almost enough to overwhelm Hamazura.

Kinuhata shouted out as if to free him from the curse.

“Hamazura! Super hurry to Fremea-san!!”

“But…!”

“Are you going to let that super small girl see the grotesque things created for espers of the dark side? And you are the one she has become attached to

the super most! You have an obligation to super live up to her trust in you!! And if you do, *she will not have to super see the things we have seen!!*"

Hamazura slowly shook his head.

He took a step backwards.

However, Kinuhata was sure he had already made up his mind. Hamazura knew just how weak Level 0s were. That knowledge could be transformed into the strength to struggle and become stronger. And he understood just how dangerous it would be for Fremea to be thrown back into the darkness.

"I'm sorry, Kinuhata…"

"I was super never even thinking you would be any help."

"Sorry!!" shouted Hamazura with all his strength as he turned his back on it all.

He ran. He ran as quickly as he could. In the instant Kinuhata had disappeared from his vision, he had thought he saw a grin on her face. He heard a vibration reverberating through the air as if from electric hair clippers held next to his ear. A chill ran down his spine. They were chasing him. He imagined hundreds or even thousands of man-eating roaches flying toward him, but he could not bear to turn around to look. However, those shiny black insects never reached him. He heard a disgustingly graphic squishing sound and the vibrating noise came to an end. Kinuhata was fighting to protect him, but he could not suppress a feeling of disgust. This went beyond logic or emotions. A system had been created to semi automatically wear down Kinuhata Saiai's mind.

He ran toward the site of the blast.

He ran toward the site of an incident that was likely related to Fremea's disappearance from her dorm.

Hamazura put his entire being into running. He ran and ran until he could not tell if the urge to vomit rising in his stomach and the tears occasionally welling up in his eyes were due to the informational violence of all those roaches or to the guilt of running away and leaving it all to his comrade Kinuhata.

"U-uuh… A-
aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!"

He shouted out even though it would change nothing.

The pressure inside him had surpassed a certain limit.

If he did not release that pressure in some way or another, he felt his mind would burst like a balloon.

His balance was thrown off, so he staggered again and again as he ran toward the site of the explosion.

And just when he was almost there…

Something came crashing down from a building rooftop.

He looked over at what had slammed into the concrete sidewalk and found the girl named Kuroyoru Umidori.

She said nothing.

That bloody girl who had a Level 4 ability to control nitrogen was a cyborg who had replaced a portion of her body with machines. However, everything but that portion that was centered on her arms was still the flesh and blood of a normal girl. She must have failed to slow her descent with her nitrogen spears, and her body was not sturdy enough to escape a fall from five floors up unscathed.

"…Uuh…ah…"

Without turning her head, Kuroyoru moved her twitching and blood-shot eyes to look up at Hamazura who had stopped in his tracks.

"…Uuh…"

Hamazura approached and crouched down to hear what she had to say, but he only heard a slight gasp. He could not tell what she was trying to say.

It did seem she was trying to say something, but her lungs must not have been able to suck in enough air. She could not turn the movements of her tongue and lips into a "voice".

And…

Something else happened before Kuroyoru could get across what she was trying to say.

A new figure fell down as if a stake had been driven into the ground. However, this person had not fallen helplessly to the ground. They had clearly jumped down and landed.

Hamazura could feel his eyelids twitching as he looked at this newcomer from his crouched position.

"What…the hell…?"

“Low level problem detected. Hamazura Shiage, one of the individuals under observation, has captured Kuroyoru Umidori while Fremea Seivelun is still alive. It will be more difficult to convince him Kuroyoru is his enemy.”

She had originally been dressed as a nurse.

But Hamazura would never have guessed it.

“The estimated number of confirmed heroes brought up onto the table via Agitate Halation is 7500. The absence of Hamazura Shiage will likely have less than a 1% effect on the project as a whole. The experiment can continue.”

The girl must have been hit by some sort of attack because she wore nothing but scraps of cloth that were being blown about in the wind. A broken name tag fell from the scraps. It said Rensa.

But there was no soft, flesh-colored skin below those clothes.

There was only metallic purplish-red and pink.

At first, Hamazura thought she was wearing something like a perfectly skintight wet suit, but she was not. With the exception of her head, neck, wrists, hands, and thighs, her skin and flesh had those colors.

Occasionally, areas across Rensa would transform to the look and feel of light flesh as if static was running through her. She would normally cover her entire body in the colors of soft flesh as camouflage to blend into human society.

“…Uuh…” groaned Kuroyoru once more.

Hamazura heard a dry scraping noise from nearby. Kuroyoru Umidori had lost her right arm, but she was using her left index finger to write on the ground with her own blood. Due to her mechanical arm, she was able to write with frightening speed and accuracy.

“Cyborg.”

The words she wrote were oddly blunt.

“She has a much higher percentage than me. Everything but her brain is likely mechanical. So….”

“Is that even possible?”

Hamazura heard a strange metallic noise.

A giant “flower” opened up along the musculature of Rensa’s back with the speed of a sewing machine and a large number of metal rods shot out from where they were folded up within her.

The countless metal rods moved in and out at high speed based on some form of calculation and then folded back up within her back.

The entire process took less than a second.

And immediately afterwards, a nitrogen spear shot from Rensa's palm with the explosive noise of the air being sliced.

The spear was identical to the ones Kuroyoru Umidori used.

Hamazura's eyes opened wide.

"She can copy esper powers? No, wait. Is she just constructing an output point similar to how Kuroyoru uses her mechanical arms!?"

"Correct. But in my case, I expand the 'knitting needles' in my back to precisely control the values. By altering the wiring of my body similar to pulling the strings of a puppet, I am able to reproduce the characteristics of multiple people and therefore switch between multiple abilities."

That murderous weapon smoothly explained her features like a model at a motor show.

She explained what this fearsome crystallization of mankind's cutting edge technology could do.

"Specifically, I can freely switch between the powers of the #1 through #6 Level 5s as well as any esper within 200 meters of me. …*I cannot reproduce the currently unexplainable power of the #7,* but I can likely defeat him with brute force using the powers of the other six."

Theoretically, it was possible.

If Bomber Lance could be produced from a mechanical arm identical to Kuroyoru Umidori's arm, then a mechanical arm created based on an analysis of Accelerator or Kakine Teitoku's bodies should be able to function as an output point for their powers. If one then rearranged the makeup of the mechanical body like a train switching rails or a car switching gears, one could create output points for all sorts of espers. Rensa was doing that with her entire body.

However…

It was not so easy to accept when faced with the result.

It was a frightening truth.

A foe that could freely switch between the powers of the #1 to the #6 was bad enough. However, the worst part was that Rensa's strategy did not require any talent at all. It was nothing more than industrial technology. If

cyborgs like her were mass produced, the entire hierarchy of Academy City would be overturned in an instant.

This horrifying technology could even destroy the very desire to improve oneself.

(Dammit…)

Hamazura's focus gathered on his right ear.

A small chip was hidden inside his ear using a rubber adhesive.

The chip contained a report called the Parameter List. That report revealed a secret at the base of the powers development program that Academy City could not allow to get out no matter what. That data should have held immense value, but this made it seem no more valuable than a scrap of paper.

With a nitrogen spear in one hand, the reddish-purple and pink puppet walked slowly forward.

"I shall now kill Hamazura Shiage to correct this low level problem. Afterwards, Kuroyoru Umidori will temporarily go missing before Fremea Seivelun is killed by the same power as hers. That will set her as the villain for all the heroes as planned. The plan will be back on track."

When Fremea Seivelun had disappeared from her dorm, Hamazura had guessed that she was involved in some sort of trouble.

(All I know is that Fremea's still alive and apparently fleeing through the city of her own free will, that some organization made up of multiple people is using cutting-edge technology to try to kill her, and that they plan to frame Kuroyoru for that crime.)

That was all he could come up with.

Hamazura frantically tried to keep his mind calm.

(But why? Why!? What reason do they have to target Fremea now? Why would they use a monster with the powers of the #1 to the #6 and tons of man-eating roaches to kill an eight year old girl!? …The scale is just too big. The level of firepower doesn't add up. Fremea is only a Level 0 like me!!)

Hamazura was just a Level 0 and Kuroyoru was in no state to fight. With as much firepower as Rensa had, she did not need to worry about some ace up the sleeve.

So why had she not finished them off right away?

“(She only wants us to think she’s going to kill us. Then when we run away in confusion to meet up with Fremea, she can follow us. That’s why she isn’t killing us.)”

Rensa could use the power of the #1 to the #6 as well as any esper within 200 meters. However, she likely could only select from a list of powers within range. She could not track the location of an esper.

If she could, she would simply need to constantly scan Fremea’s location to catch up to her.

She would not have needed to pursue Hamazura and Kuroyoru like a hound.

“(And the firepower of a Level 5 is too much for just dealing with us. Kuroyoru, your spear is the same. She has to hold back. She can’t use any powers that might accidentally kill us like the #1’s or the #2’s. …If only we could use that to our advantage and defeat her in a single surprise attack carried out too fast for her to switch powers.)”

If she had just been a hunk of steel, Hamazura’s fist might have been of no use.

However, Rensa was a cyborg. And she had been designed to function as an output point to remotely draw out the abilities of powerful espers. That meant her body’s structure would likely be extremely similar to that of a human. If she was decapitated or stabbed through the heart, she would die. If she had the same structure only made with different materials, her joints could be dislocated just like with a normal human.

“(I’ll charge at her. That will make this Rensa falter for an instant and block some of her field of vision. You stab a spear in from behind me. I’ll swing my right arm up as I charge, so send it through under my arm. If you need to, you can even stab it through my body as long as the injury won’t kill me. …If she really does want me to escape alive, she won’t use the #1’s power. As long as she isn’t using his reflection, your spear will reach her.)”

After whispering that to Kuroyoru, Hamazura stopped moving for a moment.

He glared at Rensa as she approached.

“(Right now, we can defeat her.)”

Part 9

At that time, Kuroyoru Umidori was looking up at Hamazura Shiage from where she lay collapsed on the sidewalk.

(…He's brave. I'll give him that.)

But she did not think he was clever. After all, he had no actual proof his strategy would work. But Kuroyoru still thought highly of Hamazura for leaving everything up to his instincts in a situation so dangerous anyone would want to test out the bridge before crossing.

A normal person would only end up crushed by a giant metal ball approaching from behind while they tested the bridge.

She silently checked on the condition of her left arm.

With her heavy damage, Kuroyoru could not make a quick escape. She could make short jumps by emitting a spear from her palm, but she could never manage maneuvers complex enough to lose a pursuer. Defeating Rensa with Bomber Lance was the only way to survive.

Doing so would be difficult on her own.

Whether due to the machinery built into her or the alterations to her brain in the Dark May Project, Kuroyoru Umidori could feel the difference in power between herself and Rensa in the form of precise numbers.

(In that case, the best strategy would be going along with what that bastard says.)

Hamazura slowly stood up.

He glared at Rensa who held a spear identical to Kuroyoru's.

Kuroyoru waited on the ground for the clash to begin.

However…

On the other hand…

Wouldn't Rensa have seen through their impromptu strategy meeting?

That thought slipped into Kuroyoru Umidori's mind like an unexpected blast of cold wind.

And it spread.

Like a piece of trick art, her entire thought process suddenly switched over without her realizing.

(Shit… Goddamit!! It's so obvious. A strategy meeting right in front of the enemy? Discussing a secret plan here? Rensa definitely saw through that!

Even if Hamazura was using my hand to cover his mouth and speaking too quietly for a normal person to hear, Rensa is more of a cyborg than I am and she can use all sorts of esper powers. She has to have incredible ability at gathering information!!)

She felt like someone had punched her head.

But the great pressure that had taken hold of Kuroyoru *was not the fear that Rensa had overheard their strategy.*

The malice she saw was nothing as simple as that.

(Hamazura did it on purpose! *He let Rensa overhear the plan!* Heh heh. That's right. It makes perfect sense!! Hamazura Shiage's top priority is protecting Fremea Seivelun! He doesn't care about me!!)

Rensa was intentionally hurting Hamazura so he would try to meet up with Fremea.

That much was true. If Hamazura simply left Kuroyoru behind and fled, Rensa would follow him and kill him and Fremea.

But…

What if Kuroyoru attacked Rensa just as Hamazura ran off?

Rensa would first crush Kuroyoru to eliminate the threat. If Hamazura managed to run far enough away in that time, Rensa would be unable to follow him. He could safely meet up with Fremea, hide somewhere, and wait for a chance to counterattack.

And so he had urged Kuroyoru to attack while also letting Rensa know.

He wanted the two to attack each other.

She should have realized it sooner.

Hamazura Shiage was much too naïve despite his connections to the darkness. …But at the same time, he could be frighteningly clever when it came to protecting himself and those he cared for. He would drag everything into the fight like some sort of demon. That was how he had once defeated the #4 when she was pursuing him, and how he had crushed the entire dark side organization known as the Freshmen.

He would protect Fremea Seivelun.

And he had only one way of doing so.

Once he realized that, he would not hesitate to dirty his hands. It did not matter if he would be left naively overrun with guilt after it was all over.

(To hell with that…)

She had lost a lot of blood, but Kuroyoru could still feel the blood rising to her head.

However, her anger was not pointed at Hamazura Shiage.

(To hell with that!! Why the fuck did I think he was on my side!? I've already started *slipping* so easily! Is this like growing weak when you come down with a cold!? I already know from experience that this kind of error will lead to my defeat! I was trying to keep my dark side thought processes going more strongly and perfectly, so why have I grown so goddamn pathetic!?)

The fingers of her left arm scratched at the hard sidewalk.

She felt an unavoidable feeling of disgrace burning across her entire body.

(Don't make me fucking laugh. You can do that if you want. I'll handle this on my own. Either way, I can't run far like this. I don't need Hamazura Shiage's help. I'll defeat Rensa in my own way!!)

Rensa had approached within three meters of them. Both Kuroyoru and Rensa's spears could reach now. Hamazura lowered his hips slightly. He was telling her he was about to charge forward. And of course, this was a bluff to fool Kuroyoru.

(I'll kill her. I'll slice her to pieces. Hurry up and get over here!! But I won't be doing this for anyone's sake. I've had enough of being controlled by others! I'll fuck her up! I'll fuck everyone up!!)

And then…

Hamazura Shiage made his move.

In that instant, Kuroyoru Umidori precisely controlled her single remaining usable arm. She predicted Hamazura would move to the right or left to make a run for it. She was planning to swing her spear diagonally upwards so it would slice through Hamazura and then take off Rensa's head.

However…

"…Ah?"

The blood gathered in her throat prevented her from actually speaking, but a slight voice leaked out like wind through a crack.

She was seeing something she could not believe.

Hamazura Shiage kicked off the ground.

He moved forward. He moved toward Rensa. He charged at her such that he acted as a shield for Kuroyoru. He was trying to produce even a slight

hesitation or opening in Rensa who wanted to let Hamazura live to help her find Fremea.

Yes.

(It…!? It wasn't a bluff!? He was really asking for my help!?)

By the time she realized the truth, it was too late.

Kuroyoru had been heading down a different path and she could not correct her course now.

Rensa moved her cold, surveillance camera-like eyes to observe the situation and then she chose her "weapon". With a metallic noise, the giant "flower" burst from her back and quickly rearranged the wiring of her body.

She had been given the time to do so.

If Kuroyoru had immediately attacked with Bomber Lance, she may not have.

And…

An explosive noise burst out.

After the selection had been made, Rensa attacked her target with wings made of Dark Matter.

There was nothing he could do.

The hundreds of white wings stabbed at Hamazura like sharp stakes. It seemed she truly did want to only wound him so she could follow him. Instead of skewering his entire body, Hamazura mostly only had his clothes torn.

However…

That was enough.

His clothes were ripped through at such frightening speed that Hamazura's body spun around like a tornado. Unpleasant sounds came from his body, indicating the great burden being put on it. He had been charging forward, but he flew backwards and landed right next to Kuroyoru.

Kuroyoru heard an unpleasant sound as a dark red liquid spilled from Hamazura's nose and mouth while his limbs twitched.

"…Ah…"

How had this happened?

Why had this been the result?

Kuroyoru Umidori's frozen thoughts gradually thawed after watching that unbelievable scene. The obvious answer floated up in her mind. Her vision grew dark. Even as soaked in the darkness as she was, and even with the all her gruesome experiences that she had grown to view as normal, she had never felt a pressure like this.

That naïve boy…

Hamazura Shiage had trusted her to the very, very end.

He had left his life in the hands of someone he had no reason whatsoever to trust.

And yet…

She had…

"A-ahh.
Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

The unknown feeling rampaging within Kuroyoru's body caused her to use all her strength to force out her breath. A large hole opened in the blood clogging her throat and the flow of air transformed into the roar of a wild beast. Something was wrong with her tear glands. Her throat convulsed oddly and sobs entered into her scream. She had crushed something that had emitted a much too pale light. She could feel that painfully well.

"Low level problem detected," mechanically announced Rensa with a slight tilt of the head. "Hamazura Shiage will have difficulty moving on his own with his injuries. He cannot be used to lead me to Fremea. I will kill him here and use another acquaintance of Fremea Seivelun instead."

Kuroyoru tried to shout "Shut up!", but her throat was convulsing too much to form words.

While lying on the ground nearby, Hamazura moved his bloodstained lips to say, "…Sorry."

(For what?)

Kuroyoru could not move or even speak.

And so she could not stop him from speaking.

(Why are you apologizing!? I was the one trapped by my own meaningless suspicions. If I had done what you said, this would have ended differently!! I betrayed you… So why are you apologizing!?)

"I…" Hamazura trailed off to cough up some blood before continuing. "I didn't put enough effort into gaining your trust. So I'm sorry… This was my fault…"

(God dammit…)

They heard the sound of multiple pieces of metal scraping together.

Rensa took a step forward with a nitrogen spear at the ready. Once she arrived next to Kuroyoru, she cast her emotionless eyes downwards. She held the spear coming from her palm straight up.

A single swing of that blade would slice a human and the ground below in half.

Hamazura moved his trembling lips to speak a word that was difficult to distinguish from a simple gasp of breath.

"Run."

He did not utter a single complaint.

He was naïve and a complete amateur, but he did not lose his convictions like Kuroyoru had.

"She needs to let you escape to frame you. You need to use this chance. Ask for help from Mugino, Takitsubo, or anyone. Now that she can't use me, she'll try to use another member of Item. Get their help before that happens."

(Dammit!! I can't do anything. I can't change anything at all! And why does someone else have to pay for it!? Why!?)

The worst possible conclusion arrived.

Rensa did not hesitate to swing down the nitrogen spear.

But…

An instant before she did.

"Hey."

They heard a voice.

It was a boy's voice. When she heard it, Rensa stopped before swinging down the spear. No, someone had grabbed her wrist. At some point, this person had made his way directly behind her.

This boy…

This spiky-haired boy spoke while holding Rensa's right wrist in place.

"*I've got a question: was this part of the plan?*"

Part 10

Rensa did not even turn around.

She only twisted her body slightly.

And then…

Numerous "knitting needles" shot out of her back and next to Kamijou. The giant "flower" that switched out the characteristics of the esper power output point immediately closed back up once more.

She used Academy City's #2 power.

White wings made of Dark Matter grew from her back and attacked everything behind her. The wings changed into hundreds of stakes. If they struck a human body, they would tear it to pieces and transform it into a formless sticky liquid.

However…

With the sound of breaking glass, those white wings that supposedly held absolute destructive power shattered.

"…"

Rensa finally decided to turn around to check behind her, but Kamijou unhesitatingly kicked the center of her small back before she could.

"Don't…touch her!!" shouted Hamazura when Kamijou was about to go in for another attack. "She can…use multiple…abilities. She can use…several of the…Level 5 powers. If you…touch her…carelessly…the #1's power…will kill you!!"

Kamijou's eyes opened wide in shock as Rensa quickly turned around.

The sound of grinding metal rang out.

A brilliant beam of light appeared in front of her palm.

He heard a roar as if space itself was being fried.

“!!”

Kamijou crouched down while swinging his upper body out of the way just as a beam of light shot by above him and sliced apart a wind turbine behind him.

Kamijou realized this was a different power than the wings from before.

He had no way of knowing it, but this was the #4’s Meltdowner.

“Mid level problem detected. The situation has grown concerning.”

“Are you the one who drove Tsuchimikado to such lengths? Are you the one that was targeting Maika!?”

Rensa’s back opened up and the “knitting needles” once more shot out.

While swapping out her power, she said, “My records show he was the first one to attack. I believe the standard is to repay the victim 100-fold. Tsuchimikado’s possessions were insufficient, so we had to find a way to resolve the problem.”

“That doesn’t…add up!!”

Rensa emitted a high voltage current from her bangs at close range, but Kamijou destroyed it with his right fist.

Rensa’s pupils widened like a camera lens.

“What is Agitate Halation? What do you gain from a method of influencing people using Fremea Seivelun!? Is that really worth crushing people’s lives underfoot? What good is a project that a Level 0 can throw off track so easily!?”

“The situation has indeed grown concerning. I will now kill Kamijou Touma to correct the course of the plan.”

Rensa’s back opened, the giant “flower” spread out, and then it closed once more.

A blast of wind burst out.

This was Academy City’s #1 power. She had created that wind via vector control.

However…

“If you think you can…”

Before the mass of 120 m/s wind could reach him, Kamijou stepped right up next to Rensa.

“…then prove it!!”

He threw a powerful punch toward her face.

Rensa immediately moved her arm to block the punch, losing control of the wind in the process. She stepped back slightly and the “knitting needles” spread out once more. She was changing the characteristics of the output point. She quickly manipulated magnetism to catch a coin that was lying on the road.

It was obvious what this meant.

Kamijou slammed his fist into Rensa’s wrist to throw off her aim.

An orange beam shot out a moment later, but it flew in a harmless direction.

“You can’t use multiple Level 5 powers at once.”

Despite the fact that she could use the #1’s power, she had not attacked repeatedly at greater than the speed of sound. Perhaps due to her cyborg body, she did not use extremely powerful magnetism to create an iron sand sword and she did not take control of cars, security robots, or other electronics.

Unless her defenses fell below a certain point, she tried to attack as much as possible with nothing but projectiles.

That meant…

“The lag from switching powers is always the same, so I can read your timing when you switch.”

He slammed his forehead into hers at close range and Rensa staggered backwards. Her back struck a metal dumpster and she bent forward to provide enough space for the giant “flower” to burst from her back. She stuck her hand into the dumpster and pulled out what looked like a television remote.

But just as Rensa pointed it toward Kamijou, he forcefully kicked the remote upwards. It shot from her hand and flew through the air.

“You can only do the same things as the Level 5s!! You aren’t a Level 5 yourself! Compared to those monsters that can do almost anything on their own, you’re nothing!!”

The “knitting needles” spread out and contracted once more. Kamijou evaded a beam of light and sent a fist flying back in response.

Rensa’s eyes moved irregularly.

She may have been calculating the optimal method of defense or course of evasion.

Yet…

Kamijou's fist slammed into the center of Rensa's face as if he was trying to crush it.

(…?)

Something felt wrong.

It had been one of the cleanest hits he had ever gotten, but Kamijou felt as if Rensa had decided taking that clean hit to the face was the optimal choice out of all her different options.

(Don't tell me…!!)

It happened immediately afterwards.

Rensa's metallic reddish-purple and pink arm shot out as if crossing paths with Kamijou's fist. She unhesitatingly grabbed Kamijou's throat and lifted him up like a crane.

"Bh…gh…!!"

He could not breathe. She may have been cutting off the flow of blood too because he felt a pain like his head was swelling up. As Rensa watched Kamijou kick his feet around, she spoke.

"I have decided I have a disadvantage in an esper battle, so I will instead engage you in a physical battle using my mechanical body. My physical body may not be any tougher than a normal human's, but I can control my pain sensors."

"Why…you…"

"You were meant to defeat Tsuchimikado Motoharu. I do not have the slightest idea how or why you are still on the table after completing that goal, but it ends here."

"Heh," laughed Kamijou as he dangled from her arm. "You really don't get it?"

"?"

"You say you're controlling us…controlling humans like a game of billiards, but you don't understand something so simple?"

Rensa tilted her head while lifting Kamijou up by the neck.

Her eyes contained no hint of emotion.

"You don't need some giant project. All it takes is a single word and we'll act. Someone just has to say 'help'."

“Your words are meaningless. I will put no more effort into analyzing them,” said Rensa immediately.

A cyborg was a human who had a portion of them, or even most of them, supplemented with machines, but Rensa’s voice was so flat it seemed doubtful she had any human aspect to her.

Rensa’s back opened up like a large flower, the folded up “knitting needles” shot out, and the wiring within her human form were swiftly rearranged.

She was choosing one of the top powers in Academy City.

She was choosing one of the Level 5 powers.

“I will activate the #1’s reflection like this. All the blood and electrical signals in your body will be reversed, causing explosive and fatal blood loss.”

Part 11

Kuroyoru Umidori could see Kamijou Touma being held up in the air.

However, it was not over yet.

There had to be something she could do.

Kuroyoru gritted her teeth while lying collapsed on the ground. Dark red blood flowed from between her teeth. Nevertheless, she focused her entire mind on her single remaining arm. That was her final weapon. She could only use one Bomber Lance.

(To hell…with this.)

Hamazura Shiage lay next to her.

Once Kamijou Touma was dead, Rensa would move on to Hamazura.

(I won’t…fucking let that... happen again!!)

A slight noise came from Rensa’s eyeballs.

She was using a wireless signal to illegally access Academy City’s giant database known as the Bank. She used face recognition to instantaneously search for information on the esper power of her enemy. She wanted to know what ability she would gain if she created an output point for that power.

Kamijou Touma’s power was Imagine Breaker.

According to the System Scan results recorded in the Bank, he was a true Level 0. But unlike normal Level 0s, the precision equipment had truly not been able to detect anything.

However, a comment had been added saying there were reports of him being able to negate other powers. The odds were high that the information given in the comments field was based on false rumors he himself had spread to make himself sound more intimidating. Normally, she would have simply ignored it.

(But he did just cause a few phenomena similar to that. I would be lying if I said I was not interested.)

Rensa could theoretically use any esper power, but she was really only using her ability as a cyborg to create an output point for the power. As she was only borrowing the power, a power would forever disappear from her stock if the original owner died.

As such, she sometimes felt it was a waste when she had to kill the owner of a rare power.

However…

(I must keep my priorities straight. I must kill Kamijou Touma to eliminate this mid level problem.)

Her desire never left the realm of a personal opinion. She prepared to use the #1 power in Academy City which was one of her presets. She would use the point of contact at his throat to reverse the flow of blood and electrical signals in his body.

And then…

"Ohhh!!
Ooooooooooooohhhh

While Kamijou dangled down from her hand, Rensa held her other hand out toward Kuroyoru.

The giant “flower” opened from Rensa’s back and the countless “knitting needles” shot out, pulling the many “threads” within her as they did. This action could easily have killed any human with a proper sense of pain, but Rensa’s body only swiftly altered its characteristics.

She was creating the characteristics needed to call in Kamijou Touma’s power.

She met all of the necessary conditions.

And…

Imagine Breaker flowed in.

She could feel something passing through the arm she held out toward Kuroyoru. She could feel it gathering beyond her wrist.

This was the power to negate other powers.

It was the perfect defensive power.

But…

The arm Rensa held out toward Kuroyoru suddenly swelled up like a balloon.

“Ah?”

She grew confused.

It resembled a lithium battery used in cell phones or laptops when it was destroyed due to over-charging. Tremendous static ran up her arm and spread across her body. Her very thoughts were thrown into disarray.

(Dh…gh…What!? High level problem detec-… I-I-Imagine Breaker should be nothing more than the power to negate other powers. Why is it causing such great destruction…just from being drawn into me!?)

Her mind raced around in search of an answer.

Then she finally realized this was no time to be leisurely seeking an answer.

(E-e-emergency release…of body wiring…!! Dz…Command not…received… Fatal…problem…detected… Th-this is…!!)

She tried to open the giant “flower” from her back, but it only opened halfway and convulsed violently. Swapping out the wiring based on precise values would be impossible.

An unpleasant noise burst from deep inside her head.

Rensa lost all sense of up and down and she collapsed to the side like a piece of wood.

"Cough!! Cough cough…! D-dammit!!"

After finally being released from Rensa's grip, Kamijou kneeled down on all fours and coughed with a hand on his throat. He almost felt like the oxygen suddenly rushing into him was destroying his body from the inside.

Rensa had not moved ever since she collapsed.

The unnaturally swollen arm had completely blown off. Various cables and metallic parts were strewn across the road.

(What…was that? Did she have some kind of machine trouble?)

He was glad he was still alive, but there was too much he did not understand.

He approached and tried placing a hand on her neck, but he did not even know if blood circulated through her body. She may have overheated because he smelled smoke filled with a chemical smell similar to burning plastic. He tried to check her temperature, but it felt like he was pressing his hand against a hot metal plate. He almost thought his hand would burn onto her forehead. Her back was still opened and several metal rods were sticking out.

It was obvious she was not moving anymore, but he did not know whether he should bring her to a normal hospital or not.

"Are you two okay?"

Kamijou left Rensa and approached Hamazura and Kuroyoru.

Kuroyoru was much more badly injured. It seemed Hamazura had coughed up blood, but he was able to slowly sit up.

His breathing was weak, but Hamazura managed to say, "I'm not going to die right away or anything, but I'd definitely just trip you up like this. Kuroyoru and I will go hide and I'm sure Kinuhata can handle things on her own where she's fighting. The real problem is Fremea."

Hamazura took something out of his pants pocket and tossed it to Kamijou.

It was a cell phone.

"That Rensa girl may have collapsed, but someone else could be pursuing Fremea too. Please. We can't move. That cell phone is connected to

Fremea's security buzzer. You can follow her by GPS. Use that to approach Fremea. Got it?"

"Understood." Kamijou hit a switch with his thumb to check on the app that could follow the GPS signal of the security buzzer. "But it isn't me that girl is waiting for. I'm just the replacement. Don't die while leaving her with me."

Hamazura lightly shook his hand at Kamijou in response.

He seemed to be saying, "That goes without saying."

With that hint to Fremea Seivelun's location in hand, Kamijou Touma ran off into the nighttime streets once more.

Part 12

"This is super over," announced Kinuhata Saiai while waving her arms to the side.

With a wet splattering sound, the thick liquid created from countless squished insects scattered across the road. Technically, the liquid had coated the surface of the Offense Armor protecting Kinuhata's body rather than coating her arms themselves, but the sense of disgust did not change.

There had been hundreds, thousands, even tens of thousands.

There had been such an overwhelming number of man-eating roaches that it had seemed hopeless to try to count them all.

Even with all of them attacking from every direction, Kinuhata's will to fight had not been completely worn down.

And…

"Was it a scent…no, a chemical? If I recall, roaches have a substance that super attracts all of their comrades to the same place. You super analyzed that and used it to tell them what was a target and what wasn't."

"Hee hee hee ha ha. Don't make it sound so simple. I used the plasmagene they use to gain a resistance to insecticides to familiarize them with the chemical and then prepared microscopic scent capsules that used artificial pollen. With just two varieties, one to have them gather and one to have them disperse, I managed to create a monitoring device to control the entire swarm. …It all took quite a bit of effort."

The woman in the lab coat was still smiling.

She continued to smile as the shiny black insects devoured her. Due to an error in the target setting, they had swarmed over their own creator until none of her skin could be seen. In just a few dozen seconds, everything but her face had been eaten through.

Kinuhata Saiai's power had made her a good match for this fight.

She could control nitrogen to semi-automatically create a wall to defend against attacks. In other words, the odds had been high she would be able to cut off the trail leading the roaches to her if they used a "scent" to find their target.

Also, Kinuhata did not create nitrogen out of nothing when she used it. She could only call in the nitrogen around her and compress it. The woman in the lab coat controlled the swarm of roaches by creating zones for them to gather in and zones for them to disperse in similar to the high and low pressure zones on a weather map.

Kinuhata could not control the roaches in the same way. However, she could control the air around her by calling in the nitrogen, so the possibility had remained that she could destroy the optimal layout of "scent" that the woman had prepared.

And so the confrontation came to an end.

The swarm of insects repeated their simple actions and, with no sense of good or evil or of master and servant, they simply ate through the food they saw before them.

"…"

But…

Even so…

The woman in the lab coat showed no pain, fear, or any other sort of despair on her face. She simply smiled. Falling victim to her own creation could be seen as the worst way to die, and it was occasionally the fate met by historical makers of torture devices, but this woman smiled.

Kinuhata frowned.

"What has you so happy?"

"Heh heh. Well, y'see… Heh heh heh hee hee hee!!" Even as the roaches finally reached her face and began eating through her soft cheeks, the woman's smile only grew wider. "*Getting killed like this was part of the plan all along!*"

"…What?"

“Did you think it ended with killing Fremea Seivelun? Did you think I just wanted to turn the heroes’ anger toward Kuroyoru Umidori? Wellll, today’s villain is not one to end things there.”

The woman in the lab coat began talking about some things Kinuhata was not aware of.

The sudden mention of that other survivor of the Dark May Project left Kinuhata confused, but the woman only continued speaking.

“Ahh! I’m so glad you didn’t figure it out ahead of time. After all, a suicide, a murder-suicide, or an accident would be too weak a symbol. If I didn’t create a situation where ‘the villain targeting Fremea Seivelun was defeated at the hands of the heroes’, it would create an error in the parameters for the final setting!!”

“This was your plan? You were planning to be a super disposable pawn from the beginning? What are you trying to do that’s super worth going this far…!?”

“If you don’t know, then go asking around. There are approximately 7500 heroes overflowing into the streets, but probably only one or two are approaching the truth. Do your best to search them out.”

The countless roaches swallowed up the head of the woman who Kinuhata had never learned the name of. She must have either collapsed or lost even her human skeletal structure because she had been transformed into a black mass. And even after only something like a black puddle spreading out on the road could be seen, she continued to speak.

“Final phase complete. The Agitate Halation project comes to an end with its completion. And! So!”

“…?”

“*Now begins an even greater project!* A truly wonderful future begins now! This will make everything leading up to it look like a joke!!”

Kinuhata could not grasp when that woman had died.

The roaches scattered in every direction. Not even bones remained. The roaches left behind only the sidewalk.

Part 13

“Pant…pant…”

Fremea Seivelun ran through the streets at night.

She did not know where she was. She was not even sure she was still in District 13. But she had to run away. That much she knew. She was of course afraid of the various strange things that had suddenly attacked her, but something more important filled her mind.

She had gotten Hamazura Shiage involved.

When the situation was already so dangerous, she could not trip him up too.

Fremea knew there was a world known as “combat” that was far removed from a normal life. And she knew just how powerless she was when she ended up in that world. And it was always Hamazura who got hurt when that happened. As if he was making up for Fremea’s shortcomings, he would act as her shield and lose a lot of blood.

She felt something heavy deep in her gut.

Chaos whirled around and around in her head.

The faces of those who had disappeared from her life, her older sister and Komaba Ritoku, appeared in the back of her mind.

The white rhinoceros beetle in her hand was not moving.

She did not know what had happened to Hamazura as he made up for her shortcomings this time.

She had no proof of it, but Fremea felt like everything about the current situation was condemning her.

“…No,” she said without thinking. “No more…”

The white rhinoceros beetle twitched slightly.

He was trying to tell Fremea it was not her fault and that she did not need to feel so cornered, but his wings only vibrated irregularly and were unable to produce an artificial voice.

And…

Tears filled the corner of Fremea’s eyes as she shouted out despite no one being there to hear her.

She could not help but shout out.

“Nyah!! Someone…someone help meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!”

Normally...

That shout may have not have reached anyone’s ears. It was just one of the screams buried in the darkness. The people of the city may have ignored it and went on their way as they pursued their personal problems.

But…

"…"

Someone raised their head somewhere in the city.

"…"

Someone frowned in a different part of the city.

"…"

Even in different districts where Fremea's voice could never have reached, many people stood up.

A certain term may have fit that type of person perfectly:

Hero.

And…

While dealing with the aftermath of the incident at the airport, Yomikawa Aiho of Anti-Skill was sitting in a hospital waiting room to see if Dr. Matsusada would wake up after his attempt to illegally leave Academy City.

In an attempt to grasp some of how he thought, she was reading the type of technical book she was not used to.

It was titled "The Future of Next-Generation Processors using Viscosity and Density".

That was Dr. Matsusada's best seller.

To sum it up, the book was a proposal for a new type of next-generation processer to go alongside quantum computers and DNA computers. If his theory was realized, the book's introduction claimed it would provide specs that surpassed even Tree Diagram's, but Yomikawa could not say whether his method was realistic or not.

(He's an authority in fluid mechanics, right?)

That field specialized in how gases and liquids "flowed". The obvious applications were designs for ships and airplanes, water purification filters, and air purifiers that ensured cigarette smoke did not leave its designated areas. The field was also used in health methods to keep the blood flowing smoothly and the development of new baseball pitches.

"This shading computer (tentative name) would be a water tank filled with a special electrolyte solution. Each individual colloid making up the liquid would be moved with the power of electricity to perform any kind of calculation and…"

Yomikawa could not help but feel the doctor intentionally used overly difficult wordings to make himself sound smarter. This was completely outside of her field of expertise, so the lack of explanation made her feel stupid.

"In the end, the crucial aspect of DNA computers and quantum computers is the destruction of the Von Neumann architecture which performs calculations using the smallest units of 0 and 1. The shading computer (tentative name) constructs its smallest units using the viscosity and density of fluids, so it meets this requirement as well. Naturally, this explosively increases the number of calculations that can be made in a second and…"

There was no sign of any obvious activity in the ICU.

Would Yomikawa finish reading the book first or would she be bored to sleep first?

"…I have given the colloid liquid as a realistic example, but the architecture should work with any liquid, gas, or other medium that can be controlled according to the principles of fluid mechanics. However, if it is to be used for the shading computer (tentative name), the medium used must be one that can be constantly controlled and influenced. This is an important point to keep in mind."

After reading through that far, Yomikawa frowned.

The slight sleepiness brought on by boredom suddenly left her.

"For example, *if the AIM diffusion fields spreading across the city were used as the medium for a shading computer (tentative name), one would need to give thought to the danger of the changes in 'pressure' flowing back and affecting the students.* For that reason, the shading computer (tentative name) should be built using a fluid that is contained within an isolated box…"

(So we've finally gotten to the crazy theories.)

Yomikawa sighed.

(But if you made a super computer using the flow of the AIM diffusion fields, would any of the people whose AIM diffusion field was built into it possibly be able to manipulate it? Even a Level 0 whose powers can only be measured with a microscope? …Well, doing that would probably end up sacrificing all of the other students. I don't know what it means for the "pressure" to flow back…*but could it alter the state of the mind producing the esper power or input information they should not have known? In other words, could it give them a seemingly divine revelation?*)

She closed the technical book.

It was obvious now nothing was going to happen in the ICU, so sticking around would be meaningless. After deciding she would be forced to submit her report with a lot of unknowns remaining, Yomikawa headed for the hospital's exit.

In that instant…

In a way…

She may have been the closest to the truth.

Between the Lines 3

In the end, the project came down to who to leave the billiards cue with.

One need only recall the incidents related to Fremea Seivelun.

First, there was the incident in which the Freshmen targeted Fremea Seivelun's life to bring Hamazura Shiage and Accelerator together into a single group.

Then there was the incident where Fremea conveniently made many different forces her ally during the commotion surrounding Fräulein Kreutune.

This was a giant game of billiards that used Fremea Seivelun as the cue, the countless heroes as the balls, and Academy City as the table. That world was ruled by the ideas of who was Fremea's enemy, who was Fremea's ally, what needed to be done to save her, and what needed to be destroyed to protect her.

A sense of justice and a desire to protect were used to hit the hero balls in the desired direction so they would collide with other balls.

The proposed objective was having those heroes kill each other.

This plan would defeat those nigh-undefeatable heroes without having to dirty anyone else's hands.

That summed up Agitate Halation.

While under the influence of Agitate Halation, every single hero's values would be based on Fremea Seivelun. It did not matter if they personally knew her. What would they think when seeing her in the corner of a photo taken when she happened to be passing by? What did her friends casually

say about her? What path did she use to and from school and what stores did she visit?

Just as religions from around the world viewed the possessions used by holy people and the inns they stayed at as being holy as well, the objects and people with a connection to Fremea Seivelun were given powerful meaning and value. A choice approached those people. They could either desperately pursue those things or they could try to deny them.

If Fremea was captured by a third party, had her brain partially destroyed, and was made to continually solve simple problems like a pigeon asking for food, that billiards cue would fall into the hands of some completely different player. The balls could be freely sent to collide and the heroes would defeat and kill each other, wearing down their numbers.

And so…

"Hey," said someone.

It happened within a shopping district of Academy City's District 15. The trains and busses stopped running at the curfew, but this area still provided a decent night life. The sight was a strong reminder that humans would thoroughly enjoy anything no matter how much of effort it took once they learned how enjoyable it could be. In the same way, people had eaten fugu just because it was delicious long before anyone had begun to dissect living creatures for scientific purposes.

At first, it seemed this was just one of the many bits of trouble that always popped up when people gathered at night.

A small girl knocked over a line of large motorcycles stopped along the sidewalk in a no parking zone. As she watched them all come crashing down like dominoes, several angry guys ran out of a nearby darts bar.

"Wait! What the hell are you doing!?"

"Ahh, ahh! Shit! The mirror broke. And the paint scraped off the tank!"

"Who's gonna pay for this? Should we give you a light beating and have your parents pay us the hospital bill? They're outside the city, so they won't know the details."

Meanwhile, the girl remained silent. Or rather, she hung her head down while muttering something under her breath that they could not hear.

One of the angry guys forcefully grabbed the girl's shoulders.

“Do you understand what’s going on here, you little shit!? We’re gonna need to break one of your legs a bit, so we need to go find a staircase in a building some-…”

He trailed off.

A wet sound followed.

“Oh…?”

She held a small plastic bottle in her hand.

The transparent bottom had broken and the transparent liquid inside had transformed into a sharp blade. And she stabbed that blade surprisingly deeply into the man’s gut.

“B-bhh!? Cough cough!! Gheh…!?”

“Are you shitting me…? She was aiming for us from the beginning!?”

“You’re picking a fight? There are rules for this kind of thing, you know!”

Even as the guys surrounding her grew even angrier, the girl showed no change. With no real difference in her expression, she pulled the water blade from the guy’s gut.

“Don’t get in my way.” Finally, she smoothly moved her lips. “If you stand in my way, I can’t go rescue that girl. *If you get in the way, I can only assume you’re her enemy.*”

Metal shutters were used much more often simply to deter crime than as a physical wall.

They could not stop someone who was truly trying to destroy them.

In District 7, the owner of a sporting goods store noticed an odd sound coming from the shutter. However, his cell phone slipped from his hand just when he was about to call Anti-Skill.

It was a piece of construction equipment.

A device similar to a thick pair of scissors that was used to destroy buildings had broken through the metal shutter. It moved like the beak of a giant bird as it chewed through the shutter. As the machine’s arm pulled back, the entire shutter was pulled away with a great din of destruction.

When the store owner saw someone climb down from the machine, he grabbed a nearby product without thinking.

He clicked his tongue when he realized it was a bat signed by a professional player that he had bought on an online auction to draw in customers. In the next instant, someone grabbed the side of his head.

Unable to resist, his head was suddenly slammed into a showcase.

The sound of glass shattering was joined by a high-pitched alarm.

The attacker spoke in an eerily lighthearted voice.

“Yes, yes. Sorry, sorry. I just need to borrow something is all. Once I’m done, I’ll leave, so don’t worry.”

“Wha-…bh? What…this is…robbery…”

“Watch what you say, old man,” said the boy offhandedly as he headed further into the store. He looked through the various bats of different materials and lengths. “I guess the standard would be the metal bat. I have no real reason to insist on a wooden one. Ha ha. And it’s not like I have time to hammer a bunch of nails into it.”

“…”

When he heard that, the store owner pulled his face from the broken showcase.

He gripped the signed bat tighter in his hands.

“Oh? What is it, old man? Why do you look like you want to pick a fight?”

“…Stop joking around. I don’t know who you are, but I will not let you use my products for violence.”

“What are you talking about?” The boy grabbed a metal bat with a truly puzzled look. “I’m using this for justice. *A hero is allowed to borrow the things he needs.* He can steal a car to pursue a fleeing criminal and he can grab a sword off the wall.”

“If you think that permits you to do anything, you are nothing but a villain.”

“Oh?”

The boy lightly spun the metal bat around in one hand.

He continued to spin it around faster and faster.

“Then you leave me no choice. You’re getting in the way when I’m trying to go save that girl. This entire situation can be summed up with ‘you leave me no choice’.”

“?”

“What I’m trying to say, you asshole, is ‘go to hell, villain’.”

Despite it being a November night, a girl was lightly dressed in a bikini top and baggy pants. She stood alongside several trucks in a plaza in front of a theatre in District 18.

She was Fusou Ayame.

This guerrilla band girl possessed a sound-type power and she was spinning a special microphone shaped like a megaphone in one hand.

“The world would continue to turn even if I disappeared.”

She muttered in such a quiet and smooth voice that her normal high-volume shouting seemed like it had all been a lie.

“Humanity would feel no sense of loss if my songs disappeared.”

She spoke calmly.

It was as if she was trying as hard as possible not to make any waves.

“But…”

No.

This was the lead-in. She was creating this silence to provide an even greater impression when she reached her top voltage.

“If just a single person will fall in love with my voice… If someone somewhere says they need me…”

In the end, Fusou Ayame was a girl who could only live amid great noise and sound.

And to prove it, she held her megaphone-style microphone once more.

“It would be insincere of me not to answer with everything I have!!”

She flipped on the switch.

The headlights of the trucks around her all sent out bright light at once. Fusou Ayame heard the commotion in the night and charged full speed ahead. She locked on to a hero who seemed to be thinking that it was only natural to rob an ATM if he needed it to save Fremea Seivelun. The violent level of noise was already like a punch to the gut, but Fusou Ayame amplified it even further. She shouted out with everything she had and it tore through the bank’s shutters.

“Yeehaw!! I was worried about the lack of guests, but music is the ultimate worldwide entertainment!! It’s only natural to help each other out in a time of need! And so it’s time for a surprise gueeeeeeeessssssssssssssstttttttttttttttttttt!!!!!!”

There was a scream.

Someone shouted in anger.

The normal people and Anti-Skill members who tried to stop it were knocked back and “they” marched through Academy City’s night. They filled the entire road and sidewalk.

Someone said, “Honestly, why is everyone getting in the way? What do they have against that girl?”

Someone else said, “It’s because of people like this that people like me are needed. Well, everyone who gets in the way must be an enemy, so I just have to crush every last one of them.”

The heroes who appeared in Academy City that night numbered at about 7500.

Every one of them was someone who held the possibility to individually destroy the sturdy system of an organization.

“I will rescue Fremea Seivelun.”

“I will crush everyone who gets in my way.”

“That’s what it means to be a hero!!”

The unnatural “divine revelation” sent through the AIM diffusion fields led them through the nighttime streets.

These were the people who would normally miraculously save a person, a city, or a country.

But with an artificial sense of justice and desire to protect “inputted” into them, they were heading in a completely different direction.

While holding no questions about that truth, the balls were hit by the cue, collided with each other, and all headed for a single pocket.

Yakumi Hisako’s ultimate goal with the project had been to destroy Agitate Halation herself once it had been completed.

The “counterbalance” Kuroyoru Umidori would act as the villain and kill the “leverage point” Fremea Seivelun who was twisting everything…or so it would seem.

In a way, she was breaking the egg that was Fremea to allow the chick to hatch.

As long as Fremea was killed, it did not particularly matter how, but she wanted to divert the focus of the 7500 heroes on the table elsewhere. That was why Yakumi had let Kuroyoru live after she had been used in the Freshmen incident to input the parameter of “the one the heroes must protect” into Fremea. No better scapegoat existed.

However…

Did Yakumi Hisako truly have control of everything surrounding Fremea Seivelun?

The judgment on that point would soon be given.

Chapter 4: Destruction of the Pre-Established Harmony. *Total_Hero.*

Part 1

The reboot sequence completed and the cyborg created by the city's dark side awakened.

She was missing an arm.

When she stood up and looked around, she found Kamijou Touma, Hamazura Shiage, and Kuroyoru Umidori were gone. They had likely either fled or gone to meet up with Fremea Seivelun.

The loss of any hint to Fremea's location was concerning. She might have been able to read some residual information using the #5's power, but that power had such a high level of freedom that it was difficult to use.

"All threats have disappeared from the area. Redistributing performance from high-speed battle optimization to even distribution. Beginning search."

As Rensa uttered those flowing statements, her metallic reddish-purple and pink flesh changed. It became the color of slightly flushed skin that could repel water. This was the skin of a teenage girl.

And then Rensa heard a familiar voice

"Rensa-chan. Your camouflage nurse uniform is gone, so you will be walking around naked like this."

"Doctor?"

Rensa looked around again, but could not spot the person in question.

And yet she could still hear Yakumi Hisako's voice.

"There may be a problem with leaving my outer skin exposed to the air, but I determined leaving the reddish-purple and pink armor on the surface would make me appear more of a threat."

"Rensa-chan."

Rensa fell silent when the woman spoke her name more forcefully.

This was the same as a trained dog.

She did not need to understand the reasons behind the actions.

With a staticky noise, some of her skin changed to something like a reddish-purple and pink swimsuit.

“Nice. Nice one, Rensa-chan.”

“I am unsure why this matters.”

“Well, cyborgs are different from normal machines by definition. For example, you have a ‘face’.”

“Is that also why my bust size setting has been stopped at 80.999 cm?”

“That’s a top priority issue, you idiot,” replied the adult woman with a sharp voice.

Rensa tilted her head, but ended up abandoning the question because she could not solve it herself.

Something else was more important.

“Doctor, where are you? I am detecting a problem of mid level or above in my vision processing…”

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. There’s nothing wrong with your sensory organs, Rensa-chan. No one can see me in my current form.”

“?”

“My physical body has been safely destroyed. My consciousness has been transferred to the shading computer that uses the AIM diffusion fields as a medium.”

“What? The Agitate Halation project was not meant to construct a billiards cue?”

“If I didn’t present it like that, the other black-hearted members of the board of directors would never have allowed it. What matters is that I have now stepped into the realm of Kazakiri Hyouka and Dragon. I should be able to make significant advances in my research now.”

“That is good to hear. Now that you have achieved your objective, shall I fall back?”

“No, no. I need you to keep at it a bit longer.”

“?”

Rensa tilted her head.

Yakumi continued to produce her voice from empty air.

“I am now an existence fixed in the AIM diffusion fields spread across the city. However, a shading computer can use any gas or liquid that can be controlled with fluid mechanics.”

“I see. And that means?”

“There are some existences constructed from Academy City’s AIM diffusion fields. There is Kazakiri Hyouka and Dragon. …But what if I made the scale even greater? What about the world’s oceans…no, the air. The air across the entire world. If I could preserve my giant thought processes based on its movements, I would be reborn as something that far exceeds an AIM thought being. What would I see once that happens?”

“I have a question.”

“Yesss?”

“When using the AIM diffusion fields, the students and the fields can influence each other. That is why a shading computer can be built and why the city’s heroes can be controlled using it. Can the same really be done with normal air or seawater?”

“It can. Humans’ thoughts can be influenced by the concentration of oxygen in their blood and slight adjustments in atmospheric pressure. This is a common theme in weightlessness experiments. The air can influence people and people’s movements can influence the air. I just have to work my way into the middle of that.”

Rensa was quite a monster with her mostly mechanized body, but Yakumi Hisako went much farther than that.

However, Rensa felt no fear. She only continued asking questions as a student seeking education.

“Then what do you need to shift to the other medium?”

“Fremea Seivelun,” readily replied Yakumi’s voice. “She was necessary to construct Agitate Halation. Basically, she stabilized things and functioned as a linchpin keeping me in this city. The balloon has been filled, but it cannot fly high into the sky if the string remains. And now that I have been fully reactivated as an AIM thought being, I no longer need Fremea Seivelun. Once that linchpin has been removed, I can take a trip into the realm of the infinite.”

“…This plan was a mixture of camouflage and the real thing. What a complicated structure.”

“Oh, it’s quite easy to understand,” said Yakumi as she laughed. But as the woman had no physical body, Rensa could only tell by hearing it. “Just as

before, it all comes to an end once you kill Fremea Seivelun. That is all you need to know."

Rensa heard the quiet noise of an electric vehicle approaching.

It was filled with her spare parts.

"What do I have at my disposal?"

"You can use anything but those roachies. Their guiding substance was taken, so they were probably gathered in one place and crushed."

The man-eating roaches were a powerful weapon, but they could not self-replicate. A neutron beam had been set to automatically damage the roaches' brains such that they turned their hunger toward other objects. Even if they ran away and reproduced, their children would not inherit the man-eating characteristics.

That meant they would be forever gone if the current swarm was defeated.

"But why?"

"Agitate Halation is sending the artificial heroes throughout Academy City to rescue Fremea Seivelun. There are approximately 7500 of them. Can you avoid them? Can you defeat them?" She did not hesitate to make those suggestions. It was as if she was implicitly saying Rensa could do either with her specs. "You will be fine. They may be heroes, but they will not necessarily work together. Even if they do work together to find Fremea, they will break apart the instant they spot her. They will all want to rescue her in their own way."

"Then what should I do? I have no way of tracking-…"

"Rensa-chan, you do not need to follow someone like Hamazura. If you follow the signal from the white rhinoceros beetle we took control of, you will find Fremea. Take advantage of the confusion to approach her and kill her☆"

Part 2

Kamijou Touma ran through Academy City at night.

He could not see the whole picture of what was going on. In fact, was there any one person who could see the whole picture? Whoever was plotting this conspiracy had likely not foreseen Kamijou's continued presence. For that reason, there may not have been anyone who truly understood everything.

And Kamijou could not view that in an optimistic light.

An obviously gigantic power was freely writhing around the city. He could feel the strange eeriness of it all.

(At any rate, I need to meet up with this Fremea Seivelun girl. This incident has started to leave any of the rails set up for it, but that girl is definitely at the eye of the storm.)

A map was displayed on the cell phone Hamazura Shiage had given him and a red dot could be seen in the center. That was the GPS signal from Fremea's security buzzer.

Fremea had likely been fleeing the entire time Kamijou and the others fought Rensa, but she was only a child. She had not yet left District 13. Kamijou was unsure he should be glad he could catch up quickly or concerned that her enemies could reach her sooner.

(But…)

Kamijou frowned while looking at the map on that small screen.

(Where is she running to? It looks like a large area.)

The large blank on the map indicating private property was labeled "Learning Core".

Kamijou recalled a TV commercial he had seen.

He recalled that it was a theme park created from various educational facilities such as a library, museum, aquarium, and planetarium. It had been created to bring younger children back to those sorts of facilities and it had been unified to make up for the general lack of land and funds, but a high school boy like Kamijou was not aware of all that.

What came to his mind was…

(That place has works of art and antiques, right? I doubt its security would be lax enough for an eight year old girl to sneak in. So how did she get in?)

For an instant, he began to wonder if the red dot on the map was a decoy, but then he reconsidered.

(That's right. Fremea doesn't have to sneak in without anyone noticing. She wants the siren to go off. When the guards rush over, they can help save her.)

However, the enemy pursing Fremea now was on a greater scale than ever before.

This was an enemy that sent a cyborg that could freely use multiple Level 5 powers as a mere vanguard.

Middle-aged men with batons and pepper spray would only get themselves wrapped up in the trouble.

“Well, I’m not really one to talk…” muttered Kamijou.

And then…

The red dot suddenly disappeared from the map.

At first only puzzlement filled Kamijou’s face.

He used his thumb to operate the cell phone, but the dot did not reappear. He could no longer see where Fremea Seivelun was.

“Dammit. What?” he spat out.

He began running even faster. He felt a very bad feeling building up in his chest as he rushed toward the giant Learning Core facility.

“What is going on!?”

Part 3

Fremea Seivelun stood at the front gate of Learning Core. The gate had heavy metal bars and slid open, so it was like a bigger version of a school’s main entrance. It was over 3 meters tall, so an eight year old like Fremea could never climb over it.

However…

A different solution presented itself for someone as small as Fremea. She twisted her body around and managed to squeeze herself between the bars.

As soon as she did, giant lights turned on in various places around the large grounds. They were high output lights similar to the ones on baseball fields. The darkness was wiped away instantly and Fremea instinctually held her arm over her eyes like when a car turned its headlights on nearby.

“Ny-nyah!! What, what!?”

“It does not…matter if you…are found… It is more important that…you lose those pursuing you…”

The white rhinoceros beetle in her pocket created bits and pieces of his artificial voice

She still did not know what had happened, but the beetle was finally able to speak by vibrating his wings once more. It seemed he had still not fully recovered and could not use his power, but it was still a piece of good news among all the unreasonable happenings of late.

“Also…there is this…”

The white beetle rummaged around in her pocket and used two legs to force out an egg-shaped device.

“Nyah. In the first place, Hamazura gave that to me.”

“Yes, but a third party could learn of your position if they intercepted the GPS signal. I am sorry, but I recommend that you destroy it…”

“Nyah…” said Fremea as she hesitated.

She may have been reluctant to part with the tool so readily as it symbolized her bond with Hamazura.

However, the beetle’s thoughts were perfectly logical.

He used his trembling front legs to push the egg-shaped device out of Fremea’s pocket and onto the hard ground.

“Now, hurry. Please crush it underfoot.”

“But…”

“Hurry!!”

The white rhinoceros beetle’s artificial voice almost seemed to be scolding Fremea as she hesitated.

However…

(*No, dammit!! Don’t do that! If you destroy that, those trying to rescue you won’t be able to find you!!*)

The beetle was trembling in an attempt to resist something.

But a third party had control of his actions. The situation had actually grown worse since the student dorm.

He was undeniably the primary owner of that rhinoceros beetle body made of Dark Matter.

However, Dark Matter did not require a single core. The system created by that power was resilient enough to overcome that limitation. In other words, being the primary owner did not necessarily give him an advantage toward controlling the body. The situation could be different depending on the method used, but there was a danger of an interfering third party being given equal control.

And as the beetle fell further into this crisis situation, his thin wings created an artificial voice saying the opposite of what he wanted.

“If you do not destroy that now, it will call in even more enemies.”

“Nyah…”

“An object Hamazura Shiage gave you will end up hurting you. If that happens, he will be horribly hurt as well.”

The voice sounded sincerely kind yet chose words that would accurately tear into her heart.

The white beetle felt such intense anger he thought his body would burst from within, but he could not stop his thin wings from moving.

“Now! If you do not want to hurt him any further, then hurry!”

“Okay… Okay!!”

Fremea moved her small leg while almost in tears.

That egg-shaped security buzzer was meant to call in the people who would rescue her, but she was lifting her leg to crush it and destroy it.

“…St…Stop…!!”

For just an instant, the white beetle regained control of his body.

He gave a quick warning, but did not make it in time,

He heard the high-pitched sound of plastic breaking.

The GPS signal was gone.

She had done it.

And as soon as that thought entered the white beetle’s head, control of his body was taken away once more. A voice other than his own led Fremea in the wrong direction.

“Head into the facility. Head for the museum area because it is the sturdiest.”

“Nyah…”

Learning Core was divided into three major areas: the outside area, the underground area, and the high-rise complex known as the Lightning Rod. The outdoor area she was currently running through was primarily made up of a botanical garden and zoo, so it was filled with a lot of cages either made of metal bars or dug down into the ground. The domed building visible beyond the artificial forest was the planetarium. An aquarium, art gallery, and library existed underground, but the museum Fremea was heading for seemed to be in the Lightning Rod building. She just had to follow the arrows on the signs posted around. Due to all the elementary school children in District 13, the power was turned out relatively early, so the building had an observatory built on the roof.

While running as quickly as she could on her short legs, Fremea dashed between cages from which the animals had been removed and she spoke with the (person who was controlling the) white rhinoceros beetle.

“But, in the first place how am I supposed to get inside the building? It’s night, so they’ll have locked all the doors.”

“You can find a way around that using how small you are. First, please head for the East-2 business delivery entrance. You can head up the garbage chute to…”

Suddenly, they heard a noise.

It was the creaking of a metal fence. Fremea looked over and saw someone jumping out from the artificial forest and into the bright baseball field-like lights.

This person wore a bunny girl outfit that emphasized her feminine silhouette and wore a paper bag over her head. She used both hands to hold a water jet at her waist.

“Found you.”

Fremea took a step back when she heard that.

The paper bag woman was not alone.

With the sounds of people rustling through grass, more and more people appeared out of the artificial forest.

“Ohh, I found you!! No need to worry. *I* will save you!!!!!”

That oddly cheerful voice made Fremea feel like some strange object was wrapping around her legs.

The rhinoceros beetle’s artificial voice snapped her out of it.

“Hurry! To East-2!! If you enter through an entrance too small for anyone else, they cannot reach you!!”

Fremea finally resumed running for the giant Lightning Rod building.

Countless sets of footsteps pursued her. It was not her speed that prevented them from catching up to her. Instead, the people continually grabbed at each other’s hair and clothes and got their limbs tangled together. They took each other out like water in a flood.

“I will save you!!”

“No, me!!”

“I will!!”

“Get out of the way!!”

Terribly ominous noises struck Fremea from behind.

If she glanced behind her even once, she would be swallowed up. She could tell that all too well.

And like a drowning man grasping at straw, this threat increased her reliance on the white beetle that was giving her clear instructions.

However…

(Dammit!! She’s doing exactly what they want! If she stops questioning anything, they really will be able to control her as they see fit. I need to do something… I need to destroy this false trust!!)

Those demonic calculations were producing excellent results.

Most were completely unaware of it, and the few who were could do nothing about it.

Part 4

Kamijou Touma arrived in front of Learning Core.

On his way here, he had worried about how he would sneak in, but it turned out that was not a problem.

Powerful outdoor lights were illuminating the complex like midday and a red rotating light on the main gate’s pillar indicated an emergency situation.

With the alarm already activated, he did not need to worry about activating it himself.

Kamijou climbed the three meter fence and made his way inside.

(Did it go off when Fremea escaped inside? I hope the alarm didn’t scare her into going elsewhere.)

The GPS signal had disappeared here. If she had gone somewhere else, he would have no way of following.

Kamijou continued across the complex while following alongside the lines of empty cages that animals were let inside during the day, but he finally frowned.

Something was not right.

The atmosphere was unpleasantly tense. He could smell smoke. The emergency was clearly something greater than an eight year old girl entering. He had a bad feeling that something much bigger was going on.

(What is this feeling…?)

Kamijou continued ahead along the line of cages, but he was much more cautious than before. The zoo had artificial ups and downs built into the ground to make it seem less uniform. Kamijou was walking up one of those hills.

(Hawaii… Baggage City… No, this is different. This isn't the same scent as back then. This is much…thicker than what I saw there…)

He continued up the hill. The entire facility was lit up with bright lights. Trying to look up into the night sky gave him a headache. However, he could see something else mixed in with that pure white light. Some other color was rising up from over the hill.

(Oh, that's right…)

Kamijou finally made it to the top of the hill.

And he saw what lay on the other side.

(Russia. This is like the center of World War III! This is the same tension that feels like running right into an invisible brick wall. This is the same scent as that catastrophe!!)

Everything was filled with the red of flames and the black of smoke.

The botanical garden that took up half of the outdoor area was burning.

And it was not just a case of arson. A mass of what almost looked like poppy seeds was gathered around the giant building known as the Lightning Rod. When Kamijou realized they were all people, a chill ran down his spine. This riot was made up of hundreds…no, thousands of people. And they were clearly not a group unified behind a single goal. They were chaotically grabbing and punching at each other.

Kamijou remembered something.

He remembered the self-proclaimed heroes who had begun fighting before his eyes on his way to District 13.

(Are they under the effects of a partial version of Agitate Halation? They all want to protect Fremea, but they're completely divided over who takes command!!)

They were making no distinction between enemy and ally, so they would target Kamijou as well. This was not a situation where he could stop each

individual conflict. He had to find Fremea as quickly as possible, defeat the person behind Agitate Halation, and then end the project itself.

(And that means my first priority is…)

Where was Fremea Seivelun inside Learning Core?

Or had she fled elsewhere?

The best way to find out was to ask one of Learning Core's guards. Kamijou checked a sign and crouched down as he ran to the zoo office. However, the tiny building was empty when he arrived. The guards would not have been armed with guns. Once they decided the commotion was too much for them to stop, they would have hidden in some safe place.

He went around to a nearby first-aid station and guard station, but they were also deserted. The guard station had numerous monitors lined up inside, but he could not see Fremea on any of them and did not know how to call up past footage.

After checking four or five similar places, he finally found someone inside a square building labeled "food storage". The building contained machinery that made the animals' food by grinding up giant pieces of meat and creating a paste by mixing in grains, a digestive aid, and other additives. They must have needed to make quite a lot in one day because it was as large as a harbor storehouse.

Kamijou found the person inside the giant machine that ground up pieces of beef the size of sandbags. A middle-aged man was curled up between the multiple rotating blades that were currently not moving.

"Ee!! W-wait! I am unarmed! I am just a zookeeper. I can't do anything to you, so please do not attack me!!"

"Don't worry, don't worry. I'm not one of the ones who attacked this place," firmly said Kamijou to quiet down the man.

It would be a problem if the man made too much noise and the self-proclaimed heroes heard.

However, the middle-aged man was so focused on himself that he did not think that far.

"R-really? Then why are you here after hours? Y-you aren't going to drag me out to them, are you!?"

"I'm not! But how about you come out from there? It may be unlikely, but if that thing turns on, you'll be ripped to shreds."

"I-I unplugged it before hiding inside…"

The man must have started feeling more comfortable about Kamijou because he came out and stepped down to the floor.

Kamijou sighed and said, “You just had bad luck. But not many people have entered the zoo. I climbed over the fence at the front gate. If you cross the artificial forest, you can probably reach the fence without those heroes noticing.”

“You’re kidding… You want me to go through there!? It would be safer to hide here all night.”

“They are being completely indiscriminate. They might start a thorough search of the area soon or they might set fire to buildings without searching them properly. It would be best to get out now.”

The zookeeper’s body stiffened in fear when he heard the word “fire”.

He glanced nervously toward the exit again and again.

“Um…who are you? Why are you here?”

“An eight year old girl named Fremea Seivelun is in here. I don’t know if this crowd is trying to capture her or hurt her, but nothing good will come of them finding her. I need to find her first.”

It was possible they did not intend to harm Fremea. However, if the girl was thrown out into the midst of them, she could be accidentally shot in the fight over her. It was even possible the crowd would grab at her arms and legs and rip her to pieces.

When Kamijou explained that fear to him, the middle-aged zookeeper nodded slightly and said, “Animals from the cat family will sometimes get so worked up over protecting their children from an enemy that they accidentally kill that child. I do not know who these rioters are, but I agree they look more dangerous than wild beasts.”

Kamijou’s thought patterns here were actually no different from those rampaging throughout Learning Core, but he did not realize it. The only difference was whether Hamazura had asked them to rescue Fremea or not.

“I need to know where she is hiding in this vast complex, so I want to contact the people who worked as guards here. They’re the only ones who can check the recorded security camera footage. Do you know where they would have gone to hide in an emergency?”

“If I did, I would not have been left behind. …No, wait.”

“?”

Kamijou frowned as the middle-aged zookeeper pulled out his smartphone. He seemed to be entering special values into the phones settings rather than using a standard application.

“I think…the camera footage is connected to the network both with wires and wirelessly. That way it will still be up and running if one or the other is taken out. If I do this…and this and…wait, what came next? There’s a way connect to the camera network’s wireless LAN.”

“You can really do that?”

“When some of the Old World monkeys escaped before, a new zookeeper managed to capture them unusually easily. When I asked him how he did it, he showed me this trick. Ah, here we go! I’ve got it!!”

Kamijou peered at the small screen the zookeeper held out. It was indeed displaying the grainy black-and-white footage of a security camera. He switched through them, but all of the outdoor ones only showed what a horrible state everything was in.

“But there are a lot of cameras. Won’t it take a long time to check them one by one?”

“Those rioters came here pursuing Fremea. Where did the alarm go off first? The first one had to be Fremea. She couldn’t have snuck in undetected.”

They checked the cameras around the outer perimeter of the complex at the time the alarm was activated. They spotted a child slipping in through the front gate. They saw her hurriedly run toward the giant building known as the Lightning Rod.

“The Lightning Rod…”

“It was given that name to bring to mind the idea of peacefully using great knowledge to overcome a natural disaster. I always thought it was an odd word choice for a children’s educational facility.”

The zookeeper worked here, so he naturally knew more about the place than the average person. But Kamijou wanted to know about Fremea’s safety.

“What kind of security does that building have?”

“It wasn’t a bad choice on her part,” said the middle-aged zookeeper. “The art gallery and museum are filled with items much more valuable than an animal’s life. It’s the toughest place here. If she did manage to sneak in, it’s the safest place to be.”

“Thanks.”

Kamijou handed the smartphone back to the zookeeper.

The man frowned and asked, “You’re still going? She can last all night in there. In fact, you will probably be spotted by those rioters if you try to approach.”

“If we can figure out she’s there, the others can too,” replied Kamijou while urging the zookeeper toward the exit. “And if that many people use cutting-edge technology and powerful esper abilities, we can’t know for sure the building will last all night. I need to find a way to Fremea.”

Kamijou cracked open the steel door.

After seeing that no one was outside, the two of them turned toward their separate destinations.

“Be careful.”

“You too.”

The two ran off in different directions through that nighttime zoo illuminated by powerful lights.

Part 5

As he approached the Lightning Rod, the number of people grew. They may have already figured out where Fremea was.

The area around the giant building was made into a large open plaza instead of being used for the zoo or botanical garden. However, it had several pieces of artwork set up as an outdoors art gallery, so there were still places to hide. The stench of smoke grew stronger in the plaza and Kamijou crouched down behind the pedestal to a hunk of metal that might have been intertwined people or trees.

He heard several pairs of footsteps pass by nearby.

He was still about 150 meters away from the Lightning Rod.

(How am I supposed to sneak in? It seems Tsuchimikado just climbed up a wall before, but…)

Having no way in was a problem, but Fremea would be in danger if getting in was too easy. As he pondered this odd dilemma, a thought came to him.

(That’s right. The power lines. If they’re buried underground like in the city, they need a network of underground passageways for maintenance. There have to be secret routes connecting the difference facilities!)

The underground passageways would connect to every building with power. And that included the Lightning Rod.

Also, the Lightning Rod contained valuable artwork and antiques. In case of a robbery, they would probably have thick shutters to stop the robbers and a method of quickly removing the truly valuable items from the building. That would be meaningless if the robbers could simply wait at the exit, so the passageways would be laid out like a spider web. That meant the underground power tunnels would be perfect.

"…"

Kamijou looked around while still crouched down. He saw round manholes and square manholes, but he was too far away to tell which ones led to the power network.

He decided to approach one to check, but then…

He heard an odd sound from the side.

He turned around and his eyes met with a girl wearing a gymnastics leotard under a thick coat. She was swinging a long ribbon through complex trajectories in the sky. Instead of simple flames, the ribbon was emitting powerful orange sparks like it was wearing down a piece of metal.

(Not good…!!)

"It's. So. Cold."

As the light ribbon danced through the air, it touched a metal piece of art. Sparks exploded out and a large chunk of the metal was gouged out.

"Could you make the cold go away? Justice must be carried out beautifully!!"

"…!!"

As the sparking ribbon arced complicatedly through the air, Kamijou grabbed it with his right hand. However, he received no resistance when he tugged it toward him. The girl had readily let go and instead pulled out several batons and a bowling pin-like club she had hidden somewhere.

Orange sparks burst from all of them.

Before she could throw or swing around those weapons, Kamijou jabbed his foot forward as hard as he could. He jammed his heel into the girl's solar plexus and used his entire body weight to knock her unconscious.

However, he could not relax.

Once that one found him, others would head toward him too.

"Shit!!"

He could not remain in one spot. If he opened the manhole lid while they were watching, he would be leading them to Fremea. He had to lose them before he could try the underground power network.

A girl wearing a kendo hakama swung a bamboo sword so heavy it seemed to actually be made of concrete. A young man pursued Kamijou while sliding across the grass as smoothly as if he were skiing. A girl who looked exactly like the stereotypical library girl used the colorful bookmarks held between her fingers to target Kamijou's throat like they were razor blades.

As Kamijou ran, he tried to take out as many as he could by performing a lariat as he passed by, but it was not enough. Far too many of them had noticed him.

He was running out of places to run.

The paths he might take were being blocked one after another.

"Thank you for inviting me tonight! Let's get this one-man outdoor concert in the Learning Core started!! We won't stop until morniiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiinnnnnnnnnggggggggggg!!!!!!"

A tremendous shockwave blasted away the crowd of heroes around Kamijou.

He frantically negated it with his right hand as the girl flanked by advertisement trucks shouted into the megaphone-shaped microphone she held in one hand.

Their eyes met and she winked for some reason.

"Looks like we have someone following us for the full national tour☆ I've got nothing against that kind of passion! If the fans are that excited, I've gotta go all out for the first soooooooooooooonnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnggggggggggggggggggggggg gg!!"

"Y-you idiot!!"

Avoiding an invisible shockwave without using his right hand would be difficult. But as Kamijou held out his right hand, he spotted something unpleasant out of the corner of his eye: another esper was firing flames from his palm. He could not defend against another projectile at the moment.

(Dammit…!!)

With his eyes opened wide, Kamijou tried to avoid the flames by lowering his upper body despite knowing it would never work.

And then…

Multiple beams of light blew away the advertisement trucks creating the great noise.

Kamijou did not understand what had happened.

But since the shockwave had disappeared, he focused on the flame esper. He used his right hand to scatter the wall of flames approaching him.

(That was the same power that cyborg used.)

He thought maybe that enemy had returned, but he was wrong.

It was not a cyborg with a metallic reddish-purple and pink body he spotted.

(So is this *the real Level 5*!?)

"Wait…"

This esper was not even looking in Kamijou's direction.

With a girl in a knit dress and a girl in a pink track suit on either side of her, the #4 brushed up her bangs and spoke to no one in particular.

"Where did Fremea get off to? Honestly, Hamazura. If you're going to ask us for help, can't you give us some better information?"

"Well, if we defeat them all and search the entire area, we will super find her eventually, right?"

"…I detect a signal from south-southwest."

The three girls did not hesitate to walk right into the center of the commotion. It was as if this did not leave the realm of their everyday life.

Meanwhile, the girl who had lost her speakers tossed the megaphone-shaped microphone aside, laughed, and tried to take control of the area with her unamplified voice.

"Ha ha ha. Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!! Thanks for the unexpected ad lib request! This is why live performances are so much-…!!"

"Shut the hell up."

An explosive noise rang out.

Over ten people flew through the air like a part of a joke.

But this was not due to the conflict between the #4 and the microphone girl. It had happened in the distant burning botanical garden.

(What was that…?)

Kamijou frowned and looked around.

He saw…

"This is horrible."

This area was filled with bright red flames and blazing heat rather than the brilliant white of the outdoor lights. A single boy stood in the middle of the blazing forest. He wore a school uniform bleached pure white and had a headband wrapped around his forehead. He was looking at the burning trees with a look of pure regret.

“These guys showed how much guts they have by living this long. Some of them have lived longer than a human ever will. Now, it’s true trees have to be cut down at times to help us humans out, but I can’t stand it when you don’t show the slightest respect for their guts.”

This was Academy City’s #7.

His name was Sogiita Gunha.

He was here for a very simple reason. *He had run across the commotion while walking through the city.* A true hero did not need to be led to the incident like the artificially created ones had been.

“Take this!”

With that silly-sounding shout, he simply jabbed his clenched fist forward.

That was all it took.

An overwhelming blast of wind blew out the almost volcanic blaze like it was a simple candle.

The dozen or so students surrounding him took a few steps back when they saw that. Sogiita on the other hand, paid those “heroes” no heed whatsoever. His gaze was fixed on a tiny flickering flame that remained.

“Whoops, there’s still some left. If one blast wasn’t enough, I must still be severely lacking in guts.”

Sogiita lowered his body and held up his fist.

“Let me give everyone a quick warning. If you want to flee, do so now. I won’t be trying to hit any of you, but my method of saving lives is not something you can withstand without any guts.”

“Shit! What the hell!?”

“Surround him! There’s no reason to be afraid then!!”

“Yeah, but…!!”

A loud roar exploded out and several boys collapsed to the ground. Several dozen boys and girls were surrounding a lone boy. This boy was wearing a black leather jacket. Despite facing just that one enemy, the other boys and girls had yet to so much as scratch him.

On the other hand, over half of the original group surrounding him had already been lost. Due to the weak bonds between the group, some of those lost had simply left the group to pursue a different target.

Someone said, “What a joke…”

Someone else said, “Is this the #6!? But even a Level 5 is still human!!”

The boy in the black jacket smiled when he heard that.

His smile split across his face like a crescent moon.

“C’mon, now. Stop that.”

The most frightening part was that the boy had not done anything that indicated he was using an esper power.

He had done all of this unarmed. And in that case, what would happen once he started using the power of the #6?

“My name is not ‘Academy City’s #6’. Nor is it ‘One of the seven Level 5s’. My name is Aihana Etsu!!”

His slender arms fired punches on the level of heavy machinery.

And he charged toward the crowd surrounding him without using any sort of esper power.

Academy City’s #5, Shokuhou Misaki, looked puzzled as she placed a hand above her eyes.

“Oh? It looks like someone is using their acting ability to play the role of the #6.”

She had come here while pursuing Kamijou Touma.

When Kamijou had learned of Tsuchimikado Maika’s death in the School Garden, he had abandoned his covert mission and broken out of the gate without explaining anything to her. Shokuhou had been left in the dark. This had irritated her. She did not know what that boy had gotten himself into, but Tokiwadai Middle School and the School Garden were the #5’s territory. She could not allow him to barge in and then leave without explaining the truth behind it all.

“Well, someone pretending to be the #6 has no connection ability to me. I will simply do what I came here to do.”

She held a television remote in her other hand and she spun it around like a baton.

“Category 109 / Shokuhou Misaki is your ally. Immediately eliminate anyone who attacks her.”

“Category 081 / Your target, Shokuhou Misaki, is the boy standing next to you.”

“Category 220 / You are afraid of sailor uniforms. If any get near you, you want to eliminate them.”

She pointed the remote in various directions and manipulated one of the nearby “heroes” each time she pressed a button. Despite the dangerous cutting-edge technology and destructive esper powers flying every which way, Shokuhou remained unscathed as if she stood in the eye of the storm. Of course, this was simply because she was further encouraging everyone to target each other.

However, one person refused to keep quiet about it.

This was Misaka Mikoto who stood next to her.

“Wait! Wait just a second!! Those attacks you’re diverting are coming toward me! Ahh!?”

“Oh? Sorry about that, Misaka-san. I ordered them to target anyone who used their attack ability on me, so they must have automatically chosen the person who looked the most uncivilized.”

“You knew this would happen, didn’t you!? If not…Argh, get the hell out of my way!! Are you trying to use all this confusion to assassinate me!?”

She fired a lightning spear from her bangs which knocked out a boy with dreadlocks who was persistently targeting her. With that convenient automatic cannon taken from her, Shokuhou frowned slightly. It was the look of a clerk faced with a rude customer.

“But, Misaka-san, you have no necessity ability for being here. I am only here because it annoyed me to be left behind before I saw the incident through to its end.”

“That’s why I’m here too!!”

In other words, Mikoto had followed Shokuhou who had followed Kamijou.

“Now, where is that idiot?”

The Learning Core complex was large enough on its own, but it was now in a chaotic state where thousands of students were all fighting each other. Some areas would be difficult to get into at all, so they would have a hard time finding a specific individual.

Shokuhou spun around her remote.

That mental Level 5 had such a wide application for her powers that she did not have stable control of her powers unless she created “boundaries” for herself.

She grinned and suggested, “Then how about the first one to reach him gets to do whatever she wants?”

“Bfh!? Whatever she wants!? What do you mean whatever she wants!?”

Something flew by above Learning Core at high speed.

He instantly grasped the distribution of power within the complex, circled around, and made his way above Learning Core once more.

He had already located his target.

Not a person to attack, but a place to land.

Without hesitation, he charged at high speed straight for an area of the plaza in front of the large building. The self-proclaimed heroes were gathered here in the greatest concentration and the #4 was battling a short distance away.

The Level 5 who flew down had four tornados growing from his back like wings.

He was Accelerator, Academy City’s #1.

All sound disappeared.

A group of 1000 people were blown away in every direction as if a meteorite had landed.

All he had done was land.

That was all it took to wipe out a giant chunk of the enemy force. And his skill could only be called more than miraculous given the fact that not even one person had died despite the massive amount of destruction. His ability in vector control had already reached that level.

As all of those people were unable to stand up due to having their brain rattled, that white Level 5 stood triumphant above them all.

“Gh…fh…gbh!? Wh-wh-what…?”

“C’mon, really?” said Accelerator in light disappointment over how easily he had conquered these enemies. “Don’t tell me you thought I wouldn’t act if that brat wasn’t involved. When the darkness is on the move to this extent, I can hardly overlook it, now can I?”

Then again…

He could not completely ignore the fact that he was making a preemptive strike in case the flames spread to him due to intercepting some information on what had happened with Tsuchimikado Motoharu.

Accelerator glanced around and spotted a familiar face.

A spiky-haired boy had jumped behind the pedestal to a piece of art the instant Accelerator had landed. The boy who had escaped the shockwave was Kamijou Touma.

“Do you know what you need to do?” asked Accelerator.

“Yes.”

“Then go. I’m not the protagonist here.”

Kamijou did not run off somewhere. Instead, he opened a square manhole lid at his feet. He spoke while starting to climb down a ladder leading underground.

“These ‘heroes’ are being controlled by a project called Agitate Halation. Be careful.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to?”

Kamijou Touma completely disappeared below ground.

As if in response, new enemies began to appear. Their numbers swelled up in no time at all. They seemed more like a swarm of insects than heroes who demonstrated special power as individuals.

“Underground? I get it! So there’s an underground route!”

“I can save Fremea Seivelun if I follow that route. *I* will be the one to save her!!”

“Outta the way. Do you want me to blast you out of the way!?”

Accelerator smiled in response.

But it was filled with scorn.

“Interesting. Then let’s put you to the test, heroes. I’ll use these bloody hands to see if you are worthy of that name!!”

It may have started with someone intentionally guiding them.

However, those people had such strong personalities that it did not end there.

True monsters began destroying everything on the delicate table as if they had snapped their puppet strings with brute strength.

Part 6

The underground passageways were oddly large for performing maintenance on the power network. It seemed they really were made so valuable art and antiques could be evacuated with electrically-assisted push carts in an emergency. The passageways were laid out like a spider web, so it was hard to not lose track of where one was. Nevertheless, Kamijou kept himself heading as straight as possible for the Lightning Rod.

He quickly made it to the basement of the giant building.

The guards were only human. When the man and woman wearing the same uniform saw Kamijou, they paled and put their hands in the air. They had likely been watching the commotion outside on the cameras. Kamijou frantically waved a hand in front of his face.

"I'm not one of the rioters! More importantly, did a blonde girl of about eight enter the building!?"

"I-I don't know. But an alarm was tripped…"

"?"

"It was in the accumulation area for the garbage chute at East-2. The alarm is supposed to indicate a clog, but no one would be throwing anything away after hours."

"So she used how small she is to climb in."

Kamijou clicked his tongue and ran toward the stairs.

The woman guard frantically yelled after him, "Wait, how did you get in here!? Don't tell me you learned about the emergency evacuation routes…"

"If you understand, then find some way to deal with this! If I can get in, so can the others!!"

They may have been planning to block the entrance with some furniture because the two guards ran toward it. Kamijou passed by them and entered the small room they had been waiting in.

(Fremea climbed in through the garbage chute, so she doesn't have a key. If they've lowered the shutters due to the emergency, she won't be able to move freely through the building.)

He checked a map of the building and it seemed she would only be able to move through the museum portion.

Kamijou glanced out of the small room to make sure the guards were not watching him and then he grabbed the set of keys hanging on the wall.

"…Sorry," he apologized before leaving the small room and finally heading upstairs.

Using the key without permission during this emergency would likely set off another alarm, but it did not matter as long as he managed to reach Fremea. He ran up the emergency staircase, exited to the aboveground floor, and followed the signs to the museum area.

(How will the enemy handle this situation? If they want to make sure they harm Fremea, will they really just leave it all up to these uncertain "heroes"? They'll definitely use some more direct and dirty method. But what will it be!?)

After running up a stopped escalator like a flight of stairs, he found the entrance to the museum area. Whether it was standard at closing time or due to the emergency, it was sealed with a thick metal fire door.

Kamijou pulled out the proper key from the set he had grabbed and unlocked the fire door.

It had looked like an analog key, but he had not actually needed to turn it. Its accuracy had likely been increased by using craftsmanship to combine electric, magnetic, and other unlocking methods.

The entire museum area was made into a giant multi-story room and the skeleton of a giant carnivorous dinosaur was placed in the middle. Kamijou was on the lowest level of the museum area and it continued up for five stories. If that little girl was hiding in some unexpected small place, Kamijou could overlook her.

He thought for a second about whether he should call out for her.

However, it was more important to find Fremea than to worry about an enemy that may or may not be there.

"Fremea! Where are you!? Can you hear me!?" he shouted out, but received no response.

The building was so silent he began to wonder if anyone was even there. However, this was not too surprising. Fremea was currently being pursued by *a large number of heroes that she did not know.* From her perspective, Kamijou would appear the same.

He needed some way to earn her trust.

If he did not do something here, it could easily result in Fremea's death.

Kamijou thought for a moment, hesitated over what came to mind, and finally opened his mouth to speak.

(…Oh, hell. This makes me feel like a kidnapper!)

"*Hamazura Shiage asked me to come here!* If you're there, please come out!!"

"Nyah…" said a high-pitched voice.

A head covered by blonde hair then poked out.

She was hiding in the mouth of the dinosaur skeleton of all places. It was supported by wires that were not made to support any extra weight, so it had to be much more delicate and unstable than it looked. If an adult tried to climb up to her, it would likely collapse underneath them.

However, that plan of hers did not take into account her own safety.

Kamijou ran up a stopped escalator to reach her level.

"Are you hurt? If not, get out of there. It's not exactly sa-…"

He trailed off.

In that moment, one wall of the museum area suddenly shattered like glass.

An area that had originally been a window had likely been made into a wall by covering it over with a sheet that blocked out most of the light. The same method was often used in department stores and electronics stores. Someone had broken through that covered window from outside. Pure white light blinded him for a moment.

The brilliant light was coming from a helicopter floodlight. However, it was not just that painfully bright light that entered the building.

Someone balled up their body and jumped in through the broken window.

Kamijou recognized the person.

She was a cyborg with a metallic reddish-purple body.

"Hey. Hey, hey, hey! Rensa-chan's here now, so I think you need to give up. Anyone who gives up gets a quick death. Then again, your fate has already been decided either way. Hee hee hee☆"

However, Kamijou started to doubt whether this was the same person as before.

Everything from the aura surrounding her to the words coming from her mouth was far too different.

"Why are you this intent on targeting Fremea Seivelun?"

"What? How much do you even know? Well, it doesn't matter. You're in the way no matter how much you know. The Agitate Halation project may have been completed, but my master wants to see what lies beyond that. It's

something like blowing up a balloon and cutting the string. And that means we can't have the old project remaining so stable. *To reach even greater heights, we need to thoroughly destroy what we already completed.*"

What this cyborg was saying made no sense.

Kamijou could not even understand what she meant by "greater heights".

"Oh, oh, oh. One more thing. You may think you can get by with clenching your fist and starting a hot-blooded battle, but it's too late for that. I'm only here to monitor the situation. I'm not here to fight you or to kill Fremea myself."

"What…?"

"You don't get it? You were led here from the beginning!" said someone other than the cyborg named Rensa.

The voice came from Fremea Seivelun's pocket. It was an artificial voice produced by a small white rhinoceros beetle's wings.

"Hee hee hee☆ If you're gonna trust your comrades, you have to doubt them sometimes too. This thing tried to stop you so many times. 'Don't do it!', 'Don't go there!', 'Please, listen to what I'm trying to say!', and 'Please, at least destroy this body of mine!' "

The beetle was trembling as it poked his head out of the pocket.

Was that his final sign of resistance? Or was it just an act forced on him by a third party?

Kamijou felt a strange heat rising up in his head.

"You bitch…"

"Wait just a second! Didn't I tell you I wouldn't be fighting? In fact, it's already over." Rensa spread her arms playfully and then gave a bow. "This building has already been filled with bombs. Just the flick of a switch and the entire thing goes boom!! It was all over for you from the moment you set foot inside here!! Hee hee hee☆"

It did not sound like a joke or a bluff.

An unpleasant feeling shot from one end of Kamijou's spine to the other.

Rensa was not holding a switch, so she likely had the ability to send the wireless detonation signal using her cyborg body itself. That meant it would be impossible to take the switch away from her.

(Dammit…!!)

Kamijou immediately moved to cover Fremea, but it was too late. And it would be meaningless. If a blast was coming head on, he might be able to do something, but he could not protect her if the building's central pillar was destroyed and it all came crashing down on them.

"And that is why! All I need to do! Is watch on and make sure you die!!"

And…

The time for the explosion arrived.

"Safety release. Password input complete. Okay, everyone! Time for an explosion show with no special trick to it! Bombs activate!!!!!!"

A weak electric signal was emitted from her cyborg body.

That detonation signal would turn one small area of Academy City into empty land.

Part 7

The air was filled with silence.

The air was filled with stillness.

The air was filled with nothingness.

While Kamijou lay over Fremea despite knowing it was hopeless, he focused on the quiet so much his ears started to hurt. But he eventually realized something.

"…What?"

It was not Kamijou who spoke.

It was the cyborg named Rensa.

"Why didn't my fireworks go off!? They couldn't have all been duds. How much work do you think I put into setting all this up!?"

It could not have been a coincidence.

Someone somewhere had done something. But who? There were several Level 5 monsters with superhuman abilities outside the building, but there was nothing they could do without knowing about the bombs. Had any of them had a chance to find out about them?

If not…

The sound of two great masses crashing together exploded out.

The side of the helicopter waiting outside the broken window had been struck by *a white rhinoceros beetle* of about the same size.

"You bastard…" Rensa's eyes opened wide. "Is this some kind of joke!? I had you completely powerless with my interference!!"

Without even bothering to watch the helicopter crash to ground with black smoke, the rhinoceros beetle spoke with its artificial voice while also flapping its thin wings to fly.

"The primary consciousness means nothing with Dark Matter. You even used that characteristic to restrict my actions."

Yes.

Even now, the key chain-like white rhinoceros beetle in Fremea's pocket was trembling. And that was definitely the primary unit among all of the Dark Matter.

And yet…

At the same time…

That giant beetle hovered in the sky while staring at Rensa with its glowing green eyes.

"But that also means I do not particularly need my primary consciousness. Unlike the Misaka Network, each individual unit is not controlled by one large consciousness and each individual personality is not given importance either. The more I split apart, the more my consciousness is split apart into independent minds and they join back together into a single consciousness when I join back together. If you break a cookie in two, it still tastes the same and it regains its original form if you place the two pieces back together."

This was the exact opposite of the Sisters and the Misaka Network where a problem with one portion of the network risked affecting all of them.

He could split apart as many times as necessary while retaining a sense of his self and he could still produce the same stable personality down to the last piece.

"No matter how much I split apart or how much I cut off, I continue to be Kakine Teitoku. When I detected that Fremea Seivelun was being led here, the almost 50 insect-sized versions of myself that had split off all decided independently to come here and search for any danger. And even at that size, cutting a cord is not difficult."

Then again, thoughtlessly splitting himself apart like that presented a risk of the malicious portion of Kakine Teitoku appearing concentrated in a

single independent piece. That was the same as how gathering only the raisins from a raisin cookie gave you something that could no longer be classified as a “cookie”. Fortunately, that special case had not occurred here.

“I have something to say to you people who enjoy creating collisions between heroes like a game of billiards.”

The giant beetle flew through the broken window just like Rensa had.

He caused his own outer shell to shatter and a beautiful white boy stepped out.

“Do not underestimate a Level 5.”

With a great roar, giant pure white wings burst from Kakine Teitoku’s back.

“…”

Prompted by the other boy’s will to fight, Kamijou Touma stood up from Fremea Seivelun and held up his fist.

The two boys stood on either side of Rensa, but she still laughed.

“Heh… You really are amazing, doctor. Hee hee hee☆ So you took this all into account! It makes sense. Why would you need me to simply monitor an explosion? …But you should have just told me from the beginning! Fuck!!”

In response to the two boys, a flower opened wide from Rensa's back and the countless folded up "knitting needles" shot out. The pistons built into the sides made fast and accurate movements based on certain values and rearranged the wiring within Rensa's body as if pulling on threads.

The giant flower closed once more.

And as if taking its place, four tornado-like objects appeared from her back.

This was Academy City's #1 power.

These were boosters created with vector control.

"I've seen the records from the *previous Rensa.* She relied on firepower and used nothing but projectiles while switching between different powers. That created openings you could take advantage of. She was obsessed with maintaining a safe zone. I'm a lot simpler than that. I stick with what's strongest! I specialize in high speed close quarters combat!! The basics are called the basics because they leave no room for improvement!! Hee hee hee☆"

Part 8

In the outdoor zoo and botanical garden of Learning Core, the flow of the battle had been mostly set.

Even if they were up against thousands, almost all of the Level 5s had gathered for some reason or another. Among them, the #1 was especially effective against espers and the #4 was especially effective against next generation weapons. With the two of them fighting, it became unclear who was chasing who around.

But…

"Huh?"

Shokuhou Misaki frowned after having several dozen people fight for her like captured pieces in shogi.

Misaka Mikoto was being slowly pushed back where she was fighting a short distance away.

She was firing lightning spears at the many students, but they had started shouting about something.

"We need a ground! Everyone who can't fight anymore move up front!! You take the blasts for us!!"

“We’ll finish her off, so you let us retain our strength!!”

“Okay… Make sure…to defeat…her!!”

(I don’t think her power is that easily defeated. This probably isn’t due to their ground working. She’s probably just having trouble defeating them without killing them when they’re prepared to charge at her with suicidal ability.)

“Not that it matters since I’m not going to help her.”

“You’d better help!! You could stop all of them with your powers without so much as scratching them!!”

Shokuhou ignored Mikoto’s complaints and began to take her next action.

But then…

Some giant mass suddenly charged at Shokuhou from the side. She reflexively pointed her remote control at it, but then she froze in place.

This was not a human, so her powers as the #5 would be of no use.

A large cat that was either a leopard or a jaguar slammed into Shokuhou Misaki and knocked her to the ground. She (or rather, the brainwashed students standing around her) frantically grabbed at the legs of the carnivorous beast, but it was too powerful. At this rate, it would tear out her throat.

“Help me, Misaka-saaan!!”

“I will, I will. But how about we let it eat a bit of you first!? You’ve got a bit of extra fat on the chest you wouldn’t miss!!”

Instead of relying on that cold-hearted school friend, she controlled an ice esper and attacked the side of the beast. Once she pushed the unconscious creature off of her and stood up, her expression was one of annoyance.

Several other beasts were staring at her.

The animals should have been inside their night habitats, but it seemed someone had released them.

(C’mon, really? I suppose these are heroes rather than simple villains.)

Shokuhou Misaki brushed off the dirt on her uniform and used her remote to change the formation of her “troops”.

(The more unfavorable the circumstances, the more unexpected the method they find to counterattack. …With a characteristic like that, this is definitely no laughing matter.)

Unbeknownst to her, this sort of situation had a precedent.

Kamijou Touma had once defeated the #1.

Hamazura Shiage had once defeated the #4.

It had already been proven that a Level 5 could be defeated by a Level 0.

Part 9

Kamijou Touma, Kakine Teitoku, and Rensa.

The first two to clash were the ones with wings.

In other words, Kakine and Rensa clashed at supersonic speeds.

A great roar exploded out after a short delay. The dinosaur skeleton collapsed in an instant and the tempered glass display boxes located here and there shattered. Fremea panicked and balled up her body.

The #2 must have taken some measures with his Dark Matter because he did not hesitate to attack Rensa even though she had the #1's reflection.

And yet Rensa was the one laughing.

"Hee hee hee☆ Unlike *the previous Rensa*, I'm not afraid to enter the realm where my senses can't keep up. You could say I'm the calculation type. I'll trust my life to an untested theory I've built up! That's why I don't hesitate to get into the higher speeds! That's just how it's gotta be with Level 5 powers, after all!!" Rensa was speaking while moving at speeds that were difficult to follow with the eye, so her words sounded somehow distorted and were difficult to understand. "And two against one doesn't matter. Only one of you can keep up with my speeds. If I just crush the bigger threat first, your greater numbers mean nothing!!"

Kakine and Rensa were either kicking off the walls and ceiling or creating shockwaves whenever they moved because Kamijou could hear repeated solid sounds coming from every direction that sounded similar to impacts.

It was true that a high school boy like Kamijou could not keep up with those speeds.

Even if he swung his fist around at random, he would never even scratch his opponent.

However…

(That isn't gonna stop me!!)

Kamijou took a decisive step forward. He did not hesitate to charge toward the clash between Kakine and Rensa.

At first glance, this looked like suicide, but both Kakine and Rensa were using esper powers to maintain their tremendous speeds. If Kamijou's right hand touched them, they would lose that power and suddenly lose their balance.

If he took away Rensa's speed and Kakine attacked her, she was done for.

His inclusion was not meaningless.

Even if there was no chance his fist would even touch her.

(She has to worry about my fist. Her options will be more limited. That's enough. Applying direct damage isn't all there is to a fight!!)

"Tch!!"

He heard Rensa click her tongue.

Kakine did not overlook the ever so slight change to Rensa's high-speed movements to compensate for the sudden introduction of Kamijou. He flapped one of his giant wings and attacked Rensa as if pushing her toward Kamijou.

Rensa forcefully took the attack as if sacrificing one of her arms.

"Hey." She then grabbed that wing with her hand. "Guess what, #2? My vector control ability can alter the vectors of anything I touch. And that means…"

"…? Oh, no! Please get out of the way…!!"

"I can manipulate your Dark Matter, you idiot!!"

With a roar, the white wing twisted unnaturally as if it was a sugar sculpture being stretched.

It flew in an irregular and difficult to predict trajectory and mercilessly slammed into Kamijou's upper body.

"Bh…gh!?"

It felt less like being hit by a blunt weapon and more like being hit by a car. All of the oxygen left his lungs in an instant. He was slammed down to the ground where he rolled backwards until he reached Fremea.

Rensa then attacked from the air once more like a bird of prey.

"Hee hee hee☆ Maybe I should destroy this eyesore of an uncertain element first!!"

"…!!"

Kakine Teitoku cut in between them.

Kamijou could hear repeated sounds of dull impacts. The white wings and tornado wings slammed forcefully into each other again and again. It sounded less like a fistfight and more like an argument between a sewing machine and a machine gun.

“Kyaaah, how cool! But how long can you keep it up? If you let just one strike through, they’ll be turned to mincemeat. C’mon. C’mon. C’mon c’mon c’mon c’mon c’mon c’mon c’mon c’mon!!!!!!”

Kamijou forced his half-battered body to stand up.

And he shouted at Kakine’s back.

“*Cut them loose!!*”

Realizing what Kamijou meant, Kakine immediately severed his wings from his main body.

Kamijou charged forward.

He swung his right fist toward Rensa’s face from behind the wings still floating in midair.

“Shit!?”

Rensa frantically protected her face with both arms, but then Kakine targeted her lower gut with a new wing he had created.

With a dull sound, Rensa’s slender body was knocked all the way back into one of the shattered display cases.

“Did we do it?” muttered Kakine Teitoku.

Rensa was not moving while she lay half-buried in the rubble.

Kamijou tasted iron, so he used the back of his hand to wipe off his mouth.

“Just defeating her won’t be enough to end this. We need to get away from here just to be safe. Can you turn back into that huge beetle? If so, carry Fremea somewhere far away and-…”

Kamijou trailed off.

He had seen something unpleasant.

“No.” Rensa stood smoothly up from the rubble. “No, no, no. This has yet to even begin. *The previous Rensa* could never have gone this far, but I’m different. After all, you need to be cornered like this to use it. *The previous Rensa* was too obsessed with maintaining a safe zone. She fought too logically. She would never take a gamble. And so she never took this much damage.”

“What…?”

“You don’t get it? The ace up the sleeve for Academy City’s #1 always shows itself when he’s truly cornered!!”

With a great roar, jet black wings erupted from her back.

“Sto-…” started Kakine Teitoku.

But before he could continue, his white body was sent flying over Fremea’s head and into the wall. The entire building trembled ominously.

That strike made the previous even match seem like a lie.

It was as if everything else had been nothing but preparations for this one strike.

Rensa snapped her fingers, pointed toward Kakine’s crushed form, and whistled.

“I was completely right! You’ve gotta stick with the strongest!! Nothing beats close range!! Why even bother thinking about the others!? There’s a reason this power is ranked at #1 when yours is only at #2. Eh? Oh? I think there was an unconfirmed sighting of him using white wings in Russia…but I don’t know how to use those. Maybe the conditions are a bit different. Well, it doesn’t really matter!! Hee hee hee☆”

“Damn you…!!” shouted Kamijou in anger, but Rensa ignored him and swung a black wing horizontally.

That strike seemed to chop through space itself, so it should have transformed that boy’s body into a bunch of mangled flesh.

However…

“…?”

Rensa stopped laughing.

With a high-pitched sound, the black wing’s trajectory jumped upwards.

Kamijou had knocked it upwards with his right fist.

Rensa looked confused and swung a black wing once more.

She repeated the attack three, four, and even five times, but Kamijou Touma would not die.

He just barely managed to survive.

“Ha ha! Hee hee hee☆ What the hell!? I just brought out my ultimate weapon and you lost your greatest fighter in Kakine. So why are you so much livelier now that everything’s turned so hopeless for you!? It just doesn’t add up!!”

“Don’t ask me!!”

“So you don’t understand it either? Does the increased danger act as a trigger like with me? No, that ain’t it. Oh, do you just have an easier time reading the situation when it’s a simple case of one against one? Hee hee hee☆ Are you the type that has trouble in*fights involving multiple people?*”

“So what if I am…!?”

“It means I can do something about it, you idiot.”

Suddenly, Kamijou’s reaction slowed when the next black wing was swung toward him. If Kakine Teitoku had not gathered all of his strength and knocked Kamijou out of the way, Kamijou’s entire body would have been smashed to pieces.

Fremea let out a shrill scream. Kamijou looked over at Kakine who had been slammed against the ground in his place and then looked back toward Rensa in shock.

She must have altered some setting because her cyborg face had completely lost any expression whatsoever. The rhythm of her blinking and breathing were mechanically given a set interval as if she was timing them with a clock.

When she spoke, her words came at a uniform speed like a translation device.

“Your precognition can be prevented by restricting the information you can take in. I’m a cyborg, remember? We don’t even have to get into electrophysiology to know that humans can’t stop slight muscle movements no matter how hard they try. However, I control everything with machines, so I can truly freeze my expression. If I wanted to, I could be as still as a statue.”

She had sealed it away.

If he could not make his move before she did, it was impossible for him to defend against Rensa’s supersonic attacks.

“Go to sleep, hero. In fact, did you really think you were a hero? Did you think you were a hero who could save every single person you came across? If so, you were dead wrong. *The path to a flawless victory has already closed.*”

As she spoke, Rensa brought her hands behind her and stuck them into her long hair.

She pulled out a clear cylindrical container about as thick as a little finger. It contained a reddish, flabby object. Rensa flicked the container and it rolled to Kamijou's feet.

At first, he could not grasp what it was.

But then Rensa spoke.

"You don't get it? That's #028. That's the *previous Rensa.* To get technical, it's a human hypothalamus that was chopped out and repackaged. You could say it's the smallest unit of life. Not even Academy City's tech could mechanize this part. Of course, that could change at any time."

"You can't mean…"

Kamijou was at a loss for words. Fremea screamed and Rensa seemed to enjoy hearing it.

"It began with that failed project using the #3. A clone had the exact same physical body yet at the same time functioned as a distinct human being. It seems one of *the great mysteries of life* is the fact that life forms gain the role of the master when they are created. That gets in the way of acting as a pure slave in order to become an output point for esper powers."

And so they had shaved away pieces of the human body until that "mystery of life" was gone.

She was not just a human and not just a machine.

They had wanted a seemingly contradictory technique that would fully recreate a human without using any biological methods.

It should have ended in failure, but someone somewhere had forced it into reality.

And to do so they had created industrial goods by tearing away people's humanity.

Even most of their brains had been taken away and replaced with precision equipment, so it was hard to say if they were still human or even living creatures at all.

"When you heard me talk about the *previous Rensa*, did you think there were maybe three or four different bodies? That's not how it works. This is the one body. It can be a bit difficult to handle, so only a very limited number of people can use it. And unlike those ultra cheap clones, the manufacturing costs are just too high. Even that doctor from the board of directors could only afford one. Hee hee hee☆ Production of this one body took up a huge chunk of the total assets of Academy City and the

maintenance costs force that VIP doctor to make deals directly with the underside of the city. I hope you can see how much she put into this. It isn't surprising that those Five Overs based on powered suits just can't compare when it comes to acting as a high level esper countermeasure!!"

They must have decided it was worth the price.

This was a cyborg with the direct combat ability to perhaps defeat all seven Level 5s if one angered them or made an enemy of them. Those adults were running several projects that made them feel guilty but produced such massive benefits to be worth it, so they viewed the children of Academy City as a threat because their minds were still developing and they acted based on emotions rather than what benefited themselves.

And so they had wanted an overwhelming power that allowed them to rest easy.

It was the same as how the higher ups of the city had once tried to accomplish a single goal by producing a great number of clones and convincing the #1 to kill them.

"Do you get it now? We don't want individuality. Unlike the standard sort of esper, anyone can use Rensa with the same specs as long as they meet the proper conditions."

The city's darkness still viewed human lives much too lightly.

"When one brain can't be used anymore, it's switched out for a new one. That way the one of a kind firepower known as Rensa can always be in use. For Rensa, the brain is not much different from an arm or a battery."

Was she still alive?

Was she already dead?

"It seems #028 is still functioning, but she wouldn't have switched out with me during the repairs if she was perfectly fine. Well, those that can't be used anymore get used as calculation guidance parts for the Sniper Bee, so it isn't like they're just thrown away."

This life had been cut away to such an extent that even that simple distinction could not be made. If the numbering was accurate, at least 27 other people had had their brains cut apart, had been built into this system, and had been used up.

"Why…would you…? Did someone above you make you do this…?"

"You could say that. But don't think of me as some poor victim. If I hadn't chosen this path, I would definitely have met some much worse fate. I volunteered for this to open up a new future for myself. …There are people

in this world *who live such tragic lives that something like this looks like their final hope.* Hee hee hee☆"

What had she been originally?

What past would have left her convinced this life in a test tube was a happy future?

Kamijou could not even imagine.

He tried, but his thoughts simply could not make it that far.

"That's fine," said Rensa…no, #029 with a derisive laugh. However, she gave a somehow envious look to Kamijou and Fremea behind him. "This is what you get with a happy hero who lives a happy life and protects other happy lives. People who have actually been soaked in the darkness can't save anyone even if they win. That's why it's perfect for that sort of hero to be ignorant of how the world actually works. I don't know what life you've lived up until now, but I'd say you've had a pretty easy time of it since you have all of your limbs and internal organs intact. …You may be able to save people, but you can't win this. The path you've walked is just too different from the one I've walked."

There was no weight in the actual words spoken.

However, the meaning carried an intense pressure as this was something that must never be spoken.

And this pressure was enough to violently crush the heart of someone who had lived a normal life.

"Do you get it now? There was never any way of achieving a flawless victory here. Agitate Halation produced sacrifices before it even began. Both in the earlier preparations and today. How much destruction do you think those heroes spread while they were on their way here?" said Rensa...or rather, whoever was controlling that body. "This won't end in one of those idealistic scenarios you love so much. Saving one or two people now doesn't make up for it all. …There's no point in saving every little person. No matter how much you grit your teeth and protect this Fremea brat, it won't change the fact that you didn't protect those others."

"…"

Those words were meant to knock back Kamijou, but they may have also been the central pillar supporting this person who was being called Rensa.

It was too late. There was no going back.

And so there was no point in aiming for an ideal. It did not matter if you abandoned the life before your eyes.

However, doing that would only make the already heaping pile of bodies grow larger. What Rensa was saying was ridiculous, but it may have held some truth. No matter how many excuses he tried to make, there had been lives Kamijou Touma had not saved. No matter what he did, he could not change that fact.

There was no point in trying to deny it.

Rensa was asking if he could still hold his view of the situation after accepting that.

But…

"To hell with that. That's no reason to stop trying."

He said it.

He declared it.

Even if there was no way to bring this to the ideal ending and even if he could see no way of defeating the powerful enemy before him…

Kamijou saw no reason to give up.

"If you stop trying just because you couldn't save someone, you lose any small possibilities that may remain. There is no such thing as a perfect hero, so if we don't all bring together what little power we have, we can never protect anyone!"

"You're contradicting yourself. Did you realize that?"

"Even if I am, that's something for me to deal with."

Kamijou clenched his fist anew.

He stood as a shield to protect Fremea who was in the most danger here.

"That isn't something I should be forcing onto the people who need rescuing. I just have to deal with any lies, contradictions, or mistakes myself! *I'm not saving people to check whether I chose the right answer!!*"

"Hee hee hee☆ Fine then." Rensa laughed, licked her lips, and took a step forward. "That was my attempt to 'save' you, but if you want to keep going, I don't mind. It just means one more body. You can add a bit more color next to Fremea Seivelun."

Those black wings that symbolized death drew closer.

Part 10

She did not understand what was happening.

She could not imagine what had caused it all to turn out like this.

As Fremea Seivelun sat in a daze, her instincts led her to the answer.

She realized this had happened because she had wished for it.

She used people. She made them do what she wanted. …At some point, she had vaguely realized it was all too convenient. When the Freshmen had abducted her, Hamazura had come to save her with no thought for his own life. And there had been when so many people gathered around Fräulein Kreutune. She had been happy with the end result and had not felt any reason to question it at the time…but it had definitely been twisted and completely wrong. And it was always someone other than Fremea who paid the price in blood.

When she wished for it, someone would act.

Her world was created by trampling someone else underfoot.

"Why…?"

Why had no one told her?

Why had no one accused her of doing evil?

If they had…

Fremea Seivelun might have kept her mouth shut and not asked anyone for help.

"No…" muttered Kakine Teitoku from where he lay half-crushed on the floor with most of his human form lost. "That is not something you need to worry about… I was only doing what I wanted to do. And he…is likely the same. So…"

Did that make it okay for Kakine Teitoku to be defeated in Fremea's stead?

Did that make it okay for that boy still standing in Rensa's way to be killed?

…Of course not.

Fremea used the back of her hand to wipe away the tears that were even now about to overflow. She looked forward once more. She saw more than just Rensa there. She faced the great world that wished to harm her.

She did not want to just sit there and be killed.

But having someone else hurt in her place was even worse.

And so…

"…Nyah. I'm not going to just hope a hero will appear anymore," she said.

She slowly stood up.

Even if it was impossible and even if it was reckless, she gathered all her strength and announced what she truly wanted to do.

"This time, I will be the one to protect everyone!!"

Part 11

Yakumi Hisako had "deepened" her existence as an AIM thought being by using the theory of a shading computer on the AIM diffusion fields. At the moment, she was watching the battle between Rensa and the others from nearby.

No matter what happened, Rensa's advantage could not be overcome.

In just a few seconds, Rensa would eliminate every obstacle in her way and kill Fremea Seivelun.

(Heh. Eh heh heh.)

Yakumi Hisako had thought she would witness something new if she created the ultimate esper.

Yakumi Hisako had thought she would witness something new if she bound together the seven Level 5s.

But those plans had not met their full potential and had not lived up to her expectations. That was why she had decided to come this far. She had no idea what she could see that would satisfy her. She had no set value for what height she needed to reach. However, she continued to believe that she would naturally know when she witnessed something truly unimaginable.

(I can feel it. I can feel the final linchpin holding me to this world! If that is destroyed, I will witness something new!! This will surely be something that cannot be described simply in the framework of science! The ultimate joy that will *break me to pieces* is surely waiting for me!!)

With a medical specialist, one might have thought she sought eternal life or eternal youth, but Yakumi was not interested in such things. Living forever without aging was nothing but sacrilege. What mattered was the instant. She viewed the value of a life in its "high score". What mattered was the greatest moment in that life.

(Now, Rensa-chan. Do it now, Rensa-chan! Kill Fremea Seivelun for me. I will likely be destroyed when I see what awaits me, but in that single instant I will set an extraordinary and unprecedented record!!)

And…

Yakumi Hisako suddenly realized something. She was not sure why she had realized it, but she had nonetheless.

Fremea Seivelun had raised her head and was looking Yakumi directly in the eye.

It seemed like a normal thing…but it was not. As an AIM thought being, Yakumi could not be seen by human eyes. Fremea could easily look in Yakumi's direction, but she should not have been able to see her. Nevertheless, she was staring directly at the woman.

(What? What is this slippery feeling? This is the same feeling as when my previous plans did not meet their full potential. But nothing here could possibly lead to my failure! Once Rensa-chan kills Fremea, the final linchpin, I will no longer be restricted to Academy City. I will be able to fly out into the entire world. Nothing can change that now!!)

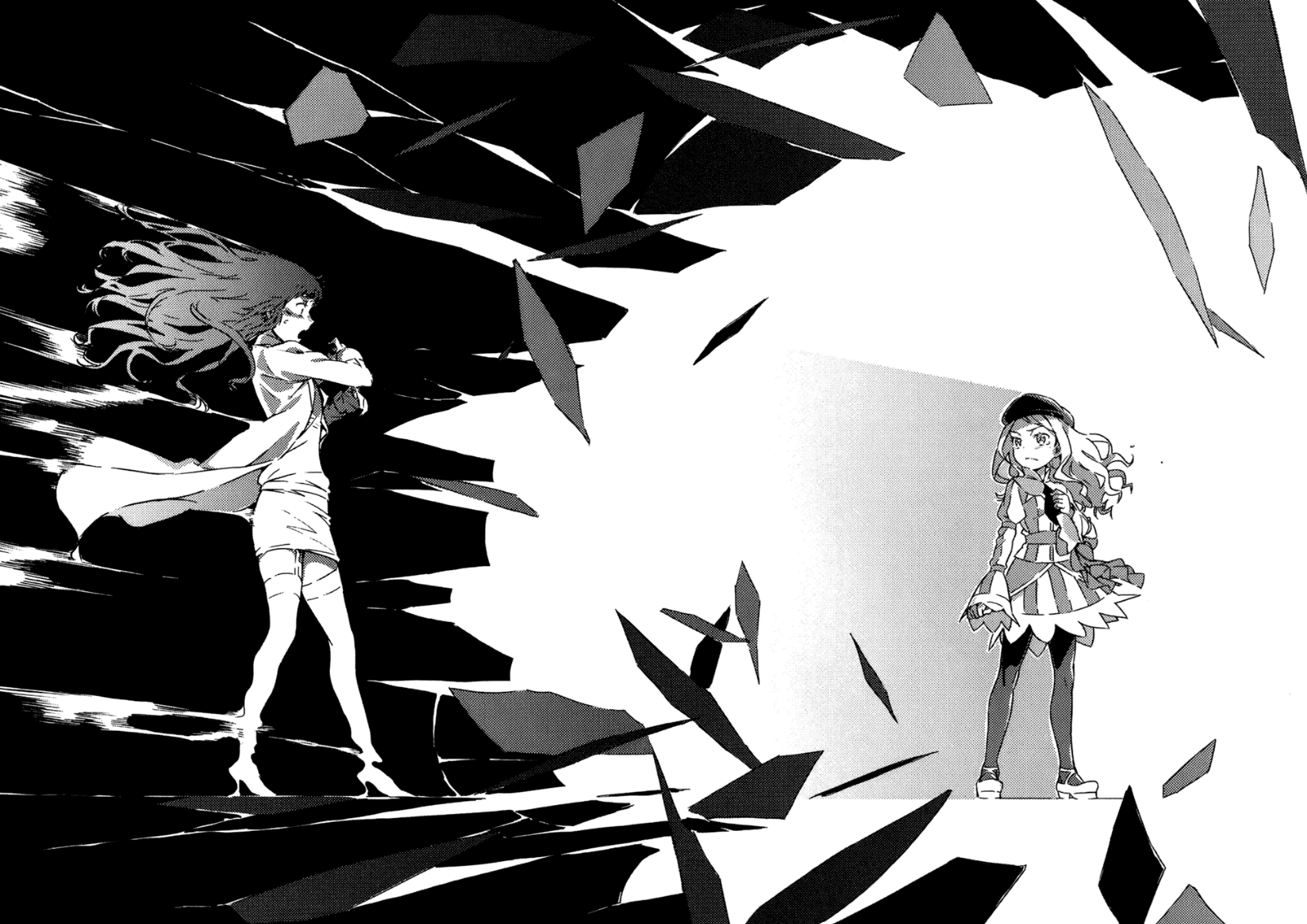
And then she heard a voice.

It said, "…Nyah. I'm not going to just hope a hero will appear anymore."

(Wait.)

Yakumi's thoughts had been wrapped in an inhuman exhilaration, but now an unrefined and raw anxiety filled her.

This final linchpin was holding Yakumi Hisako back. It was keeping her "human".



(The pillar supporting the entire Agitate Halation project was that Fremea Seivelun was the representative of the weak who needed protection. If she becomes something other than a protection target now…!! Wait! This can't be happening…!!)

"This time, I will be the one to protect everyone!!"

A sound similar to shattering glass exploded out.

In that instant, Yakumi Hisako and Fremea Seivelun were in "the same place".

Had Yakumi returned or had Fremea joined her?

(Honestly, I may have been the one to design her, but who would have thought she would function so perfectly as a final linchpin?)

"But neither of us has any direct power. We can only wait for the result!! And it is as plain as day what will happen here. You will be killed and I will be released from this city! No one can change that now!!"

"Nyah. That isn't true," decisively denied Fremea Seivelun. "It may be incredibly small, it may be almost entirely useless, and you may call us Level "0", but our power is not zero!! It is not true at all that there is nothing we can do!!"

Those words filled Yakumi with an incomparable sense of disgust. A grimace appeared on her face as an unpleasant feeling raced down her spine.

And then she realized something.

(What…is this? My face? My spine? I abandoned everything, so why do I have *such normal things*!? It's… It's almost as if…)

It was almost as if Fremea Seivelun was controlling everything.

Could a mere Level 0 control the entirety of the AIM diffusion fields?

No.

However…

(The shading computer uses every movement of the target fluid to perform its calculations. In that case, even the smallest power producing the AIM diffusion fields creating me has a connection!!)

Even a Level 0 caused changes on the microscopic level.

Their powers were referred to as "zero" because they were of no use in normal life, but it was not technically true to say they could do nothing.

And in that case…

(Even the smallest unit of information making up the shading computer can influence a giant AIM thought being inside the computer!? Shit. All she needed was to realize it. And I gave her that realization by soaking her too deeply in Agitate Halation!!)

A staticky pain raced across Yakumi Hisako's consciousness. She grimaced and then felt something vaguely floating up deep in her mind.

"Doctor…"

She could see a hospital room.

The white room was filled with machinery gathered around a single bed for a young child.

"Doctor…"

She did not know who it was.

She could not see the child's face. The child's entire body was wrapped in bandages without even any holes for the eyes. Something dark red was seeping into the bandages from within. A breathing tube was sticking between the bandages at the mouth and it sounded as if each word was spoken with great pain.

However…

Despite the child's eyes and mouth being covered, Yakumi Hisako could still clearly tell that this child was smiling. That smile was pure and innocent. It held everything that Yakumi lacked.

"Doctor, are humans really as noble as you say they are…?"

Yakumi Hisako heard a slapping sound.

It was the sound of her hand being forcefully brought up to her face.

(I've never seen this before. I've never seen this scene before! Is Fremea Seivelun… Is the final linchpin using the gathered AIM diffusion fields to randomly send someone's memories into my head!? The data itself has no meaning. Is she trying to crush me by overwriting pieces of my mind again and again until my original mind is unrecoverable!?)

The static continued to amplify.

She was no longer able to tell what information in her head was actually her own.

"It's…kay."

"The human body…occasionally…dern medicine……heal itself……."

"You wi……tainly……better. I prom……okay?"

(I…! I am not that simple kind of tragic villain! But at this rate, I cannot recover. I will be crushed by this massive amount of data!!)

"Wait!!" frantically shouted Yakumi Hisako. She felt intense humiliation over the fact that she had fallen far enough to feel frantic about anything. "You do not understand the true scope of this project. The violent side is no more than one small portion of it. If you could see the ultimate goal, surely even you would-…!!"

"I don't need to understand," spat out Fremea. Like a great hero cutting down the symbol of evil, she spoke without hesitation. "I have no interest whatsoever in your project! I just want me, Hamazura, the rhinoceros beetle, and everyone else to have their smiles back!!"

Part 12

A ridiculous snapping sound rang out.

It came from within the female cyborg named Rensa as she licked her lips.

"Oh?"

She stopped moving.

The black wings erupting from her back dissipated in an instant.

"What!? Wait a second. I don't remember calling in a ridiculous power like this!!"

Her stomach swelled up horribly large like a lithium battery that was continually overcharged.

When Rensa (#028) had tried to use Kamijou Touma's power, she had failed to control the power she could not understand and her arm had exploded.

When it came down to it, this was the same.

However, this time Fremea Seivelun had thrown the existence known as Yakumi Hisako into Rensa.

"Abh…gbh… Wait…what is…gagh!! Ghh!!"

"Heh…Eh heh heh. Gjh…This…this is how it ends for me…? Heh heh heh heh heh!!"

Two voices came from the one body.

And as they spoke, Rensa's body continued to swell. Her chest, her face, her arms, and her legs swelled. As each point swelled further and further, she began looking less and less human.

While lying on the floor and gradually regaining his own human form, Kakine Teitoku calmly spoke to the boy who could still fight.

"End this…now."

"I will."

Kamijou clenched his right fist even tighter than before.

He walked toward Rensa as she continued to change.

Rensa rolled her warped eyeballs to glare at Kamijou.

"Hee hee hee☆ What the hell? What the hell!? You're going to kill me? Your ideals are full of contradictions and there's nothing right about them!!"

"…"

Kamijou Touma's right fist contained a power known as Imagine Breaker. It would eliminate any supernatural power, be it magic or psychic in nature, the instant he touched it.

It would only take a single fingertip to erase this "abnormality" that had entered the cyborg named Rensa.

That would be the most efficient way of saving #029 who was having an intense burden placed on her body.

However…

"What do you want me to do?"

"Ha ha! Ha ha ha!! Don't make me laugh. Weren't you listening? I wanted this. Yakumi Hisako of the board of directors is my savior for *turning me into this*! You want me to hand her over? You want me to let go of her? I'll never do that. That is one of the few things in this world I would rather die than do!!"

That was not unexpected.

If she was willing to go along with this cruel project, she had to have some reason for doing so. Even if Kamijou was not aware of any of it, she had a life that she had lived up to this point.

"Say there are 10 people caught in a crisis. Only 9 can be saved. If nine of them abandon the one and evacuate, it is not considered a crime according to the plank of Carneades. When I was put in that situation, the only options I could think of were to kill someone or to offer myself up as a sacrifice.

However, she showed me that there is a third option! Even if I ended up like this and even if those 10 people who were more important than the world to each other are now only nine, no one had to die! …And this did not just save me or whoever I would have killed. Everyone there was saved from the great pressure of having to kill someone to survive!! And that is why I have nothing but thanks even if I had to take such a cruel path!!"

"…"

"And this wasn't just me! It wasn't just #029! I haven't heard anything from the others, but all of us have our reasons for willingly obeying that woman as we run through the darkness. I won't let you…I won't let *someone who showed up much too late* take that away from us! To us, Yakumi Hisako, the woman writhing around within this body, is the greatest hero in the world!!"

He understood that.

Kamijou Touma alone could not save every single person in the world who was seeking help. And as long as life continued on, there would definitely be someone saving people he did not know using methods he was not aware of in places he had never been.

And of course, there would be people who adored those heroes.

"I won't let you have her… That is the one thing that-…gggbbhg!!"

Rensa's cyborg body continued to swell up. Her beautiful feminine silhouette was completely gone and some kind of fiber was sticking out. It looked like someone had stuffed a firecracker inside a straw doll and detonated it.

"Then…" said Kamijou through clenched teeth. His voice quickly grew to a shout he could not hold back. "Then why didn't you go save Yakumi Hisako earlier!?"

"…!!"

"If you wait around for a hero, they won't always make it in time. That's just a fact of life. But what if you had done everything you could until they could arrive!? What if you had desperately fought until they could!? You might have been able to change the outcome!!"

Before this happened.

Before she became an AIM thought being.

Back when she was a proper human being.

Long ago.

“How can you say that?” said Rensa as her face cracked and grew more warped from the inside. “That isn’t something I can do! That’s something only you can do! So don’t force it onto me!! And I’m not talking about how many chances I had to control this body or that I was only a small core in a test tube. I’m saying that someone like me can’t play the role of a hero!”

Kamijou did not say “you can”.

He shook his head and gave a different reply.

“You already are. You’re doing a wonderful job right now.”

“Shut up,” cut in Rensa. That cyborg moved her red eyes that had been damaged on the inside and stared at her enemy. “I can never be a clichéd hero like you! I’m just a filthy tool. That is the only way for me to repay her for what she did for me!!”

Who was protecting who?

Who was killing who?

Anyone could tell something as simple as that without an explanation. Kamijou Touma tightly clenched his right fist and made an announcement.

“Let’s go, hero.”

“Shut up…”

“I can no longer do anything but destroy. This hand can only destroy your illusions!! So now it’s your turn to make it in time!!”

“Shut uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuppppppppppppppppppppppppppp!!”

Wings shot forcefully from Rensa’s back even as it collapsed.

However, these were not jet black.

They were white.

This was the ultimate power Academy City’s #1 had once risen to when he had gained a certain something. Rensa had...no, #029 had finally made it that far.

Kamijou Touma had no plan.

He took a step.

And then another.

He advanced directly toward his enemy.

(Saving #029 is simple. I just need to drive Yakumi Hisako out of her body. But I can't hold back with my right hand's power. If I end this, I will be killing someone to save someone.)

The fact that this person had no physical body did not absolve him.

For example, there was Kazakiri Hyouka who was an aggregation of AIM diffusion fields.

For example, there was Fräulein Kreutune whose body was fundamentally different from a normal human's.

For example, there was Misaka Imouto who could be mass produced as much as was needed.

He had saved abnormal people by treating them as human. And that was why Kamijou of all people could not so easily abandon this woman. The path he had walked to reach this point would not allow it.

"Ah…ogh…Ahghh…"

As if in response, Rensa walked unsteadily forward with those pure white wings still growing from her back.

The internal damage had advanced to the point that she could not even stand up straight anymore and she was not even aware she was staggering, but she still faced Kamijou.

(But…)

Their gazes collided in midair.

A strange power seemed to fill both their bodies.

(I know something now. No matter how much you might resent me for it, and no matter how much of a contradiction it is, there is someone standing before me who I can save like this!!)

"You can't stop me," spat out Kamijou Touma. "*I will save you.*"

"Bgh....ghh… Stop…joking around… That's…the wrong person!!"

Their clash lasted for only an instant.

Rensa used her cyborg body to charge up to Kamijou at supersonic speeds. She swung the white wings on her back to the right and left simultaneously. That boy should not have been able to do anything. The speed was one problem, but she had also changed her settings to eliminate all slight changes to her expression and the surface of her body. In other words, Kamijou could not use the precognition he had gained via experience.

However…

Kamijou Touma's body sank down as if they had arranged it ahead of time.

Rensa was moving at such tremendous speed that he could never have made it in time if he had started moving after seeing what she was doing. Yet the boy accurately waited for Rensa as if he had foreseen her exact actions.

As the destruction continued within Rensa's body, even #029 had started to lose control.

Even if she had cut off all facial expressions, a slight trembling had returned.

"No...!!"

(So...)

Kamijou Touma clenched his fist.

He clenched it so tight blood oozed out.

Instead of using his right hand on the white wings being swung down from the right and left, he evaded them by swinging his upper body out of the way. He then used all his strength to throw his fist at the center of Rensa's face as they glared at each other from extreme close range.

(So think for yourself!! Think up a way of saving the person you want to protect most!!)

His fist flew.

A look of surprise appeared on Rensa's cyborg face.

And...

Epilogue: Once It's Over. *to_the_Main_Line.*

It had to be a medium such as liquid, gas, or particles that could be calculated out using fluid mechanics.

To actually be usable, it had to be a medium that could be controlled and manipulated.

To make use of the viscosity and density, the medium had to be made up of a considerable amount of the substance.

“Bhah…!! Pant pant pant pant!!”

Yakumi Hisako was revived in a dark back alley in District 13.

(Th-that was close. I never imagined that right hand could destroy an AIM thought being in a single strike. If I had not prepared this insurance, that would have been the end for me.)

If she was to exist as an AIM thought being using the shading computer, she needed a processor to sustain her existence. And this also meant she could be revived any number of times as long as that processing power existed.

Yes.

For example, *she could use the “scent” being emitted by the swarm of man-eating cockroaches that continued their chaotic group motion.*

“Abh…gh…cough cough!! Ghh… I-it really is hard to keep thinking with so few of them left…”

Yakumi Hisako was no longer using the AIM diffusion fields, so it was unclear if she could still be called an AIM thought being. However, she certainly could not be called human.

And she viewed that fact as a good thing.

It meant she still had a chance.

Even Rensa had not been told about this final backup. She had lied and told the girl Kinuhata Saiai had destroyed them all. Hiding information from her allies was a bad habit of hers, but it had helped her out here.

“Now that I am an information life form with no physical body, nothing can stop me. I can try no matter how many times it takes. I can eternally use up more and more resources until I succeed. I can continue on and on and on until they raise the white flag.”

By turning her thoughts into words, she gradually stabilized her existence.

This also gave order to the chaotic movements of the roaches.

“It is now time to restart the Agitate Halation project. Humans let their guard down the most when they think they have won. I will have no problem killing Fremea Seivelun now.”

Suddenly…

Someone stepped into the alley. This person was all too defenseless.

“Found you,” said a plain young girl’s voice. “I found the bad guy.”

Yakumi Hisako did not view this girl as a threat. She sent out the swarm of man-eating roaches. The first few dozen roaches began mercilessly eating into that young body.

However…

“Ah…eh…?”

The girl ignored Yakumi’s surprise and continued forward.

The girl paid no heed to the swarm of roaches eating into the arms, legs, and cheeks not covered by her white dress. She did not bleed a single drop of blood as she approached Yakumi Hisako with smooth movements.

Finally, Yakumi began to grow worried.

She felt something that no human should have ever felt.

She felt the fear of being stared down by one’s natural predator.

(I-it’s okay. I don’t know what power she can use, but she’s just a human. I am a complete information life form with no physical body, so no physical attack can-…gbgh!!!???)

She was bitten into.

She was eaten.

With no physical body, Yakumi Hisako could not be described using the standard parts of the human body such as “limbs” or “head”. And yet she could tell. If her existence was described as a percentage, that white girl had taken away over 30% in a single bite.

As she saw that girl acting like her cheeks were stuffed full, Yakumi Hisako was overcome with fear. And what frightened her the most was just how “cute” the girl looked.

She tried to move back, but the girl took another step forward in response.

That was all it took to fill the gap.

And then the girl, that “human” named Fräulein Kreutune, opened her small mouth wide and spoke.

“Two stars. Not bad.”

In no time, she munched through the powerful and overwhelming existence that was Yakumi Hisako. The girl did it as easily as a child eating freshly baked bread.

Yakumi Hisako was disappearing.

She was dying.

Just before that moment, she felt an odd peace that exceeded the fear. She had tried to build her existence up with more and more information, but now it was disappearing. And as she simplified, she felt ecstasy.

(Is that what it is to die?)

But as soon as she had that thought, she learned of an even greater hell.

“Burp.”

The frightening white girl suddenly stopped.

Only a tiny piece was left.

It was just a single bite. She left behind just one piece of that existence like leaving one last scrap on the plate.

“Now then.”

“…Wait…What are you-…?”

“This is your punishment. Your punishment for hurting my friend.”

She had not managed to continue down the path of complexity, and now she was prevented from continuing down the path of simplicity.

Just as a fish sliced up to be eaten could never swim through the ocean again, Yakumi Hisako would have to writhe around like this forever.

That girl faced her with cold eyes and said, “After having a long, long time to think on it, you might truly manage to see yourself properly. If that happens, I will eat the final piece. You can look forward to that at the end of your long, long life.”

It all came to an end as if someone had flipped a switch.

The riot made up of 7500 people attacking Learning Core in District 13 had ended with an eerie silence. The fact that the commotion had ended with the defeat of Rensa and Yakumi Hisako hinted that the two of them had

been influencing the rioters in some way. (Although there had been a bit of a delay after Yakumi's apparent defeat.) However, there were still some unknown factors about that incident with close ties to Academy City's dark side. And even if it became fully understood, would the students who took part as rioters be considered truly innocent of any wrongdoing? That was another unknown factor.

"Oh, no. Oh, no."

Dawn had arrived.

A woman wearing a cheap suit and a lab coat muttered to herself while taking a walk on a District 13 jogging course along with a golden retriever. The November mornings had grown more cold than refreshing, so no one else was using the course. After an hour, when the temperature had risen some, it would probably be overflowing with health nuts.

"Well, I had a feeling it would fail, but I may have let her go free for a biiit too long. Yakumi-san was a member of the board of directors and a nice patron."

And then she received a response.

"Are you sure it isn't that you played around too much?"

The voice sounded like that of a man in the prime of his life. However, the woman in the cheap suit and lab coat was the only person there. The voice had come from the golden retriever on the end of the leash she held.

He(?) spoke with his long tongue sticking out.

"That was the same as the Dark May Project that Kinuhata Saiai and Kuroyoru Umidori went through. You implanted your intellectual curiosity into Yakumi Hisako and it fused with her original field of expertise. I do understand that you could not get her to understand how we Kiharas think otherwise, but still."

That was why Yakumi Hisako had continued with such dark research.

It was possible that the bonds placed on her by the Dark May Project had been partially broken around the time she had lost control to Fremea Seivelun. She may have mistaken it for being buried by strange external information, but the truth was the opposite. What Yakumi Hisako had thought was the base of her being had been a lie.

"Heh heh heh heh. She had been wondering why she got along so well with me. She had my thoughts implanted into her, so of course we got along. She was excellent as a patron who let me do anything I wanted. It was like she

was my knight in shining armor. I had all the funding I wanted and all the authority I wanted."

"You went too far."

"And I've seen the error of my ways," honestly admitted the woman in the cheap suit and lab coat.

The conversation sounded like a teacher speaking with a student.

"You have already started playing around with a new candidate to hide behind, haven't you?"

"With a member of the board of directors gone, they need to bring in a replacement. I've already identified the top 3 likely candidates, so-…"

"…"

"Yes, yes. I know it would be way too suspicious. I really do. But preparing insurance and having a plan B just isn't very Kihara-like, you know?"

"What is your plan?"

"I was thinking of going with the Shadow Ruler plan."

"…Is there really some convenient organization you can use?"

"No, but they'll take action if we make them think there is. Even in this city of science, things like jinxes are all over the place. If I manipulate a bit of information to make certain facts seem true, they will bring the pieces together themselves to form the jigsaw puzzle that shows a giant monster. The method is used all the time. Think of the M-Fund or the UFO Investigation Committee. Now, let's go deceive some important people."

"I suppose the basics are the best way to get back on your feet. I can give you two or three people who seem unintelligent enough to use in your plan. They have plenty of money, but are frustrated at their inability to gain any real social standing. They should jump at any chance you present to them. Do your best to prod them in the right direction."

"Thanks as always," said the woman in the cheap suit and lab coat.

It was hard to imagine how a Kihara in the form of a dog could make connections with such prideful people, but he(?) was actually the most influential of the Kiharas in many different fields.

"Agitate Halation is as good as dead now. What should we do about it now?"

"I was never particularly interested in it, but can you really call that a failure?"

"?"

“Against Yakumi Hisako’s wishes, the Level 5s gathered in one place. And despite that Imagine Breaker presumably negating any influence from the AIM diffusion fields, that boy appeared on the stage of his own free will to end the incident. …Yakumi Hisako’s experiment may have ended in failure, but what if Agitate Halation was simply too much for her to handle? There may still be something hidden there that would make your eyes sparkle in excitement.”

“Ugh. Now that you mention it, you’re right.”

“You truly never show any motivation if I am not keeping score for you,” said the golden retriever in annoyance

However, the woman in the cheap suit and lab coat only scratched at her head in embarrassment.

“I’m getting that same feeling as always.”

“Yes. Once more, the world is simply filled with science.”

The incident came to an end.

And that meant there was one piece of business that had to be dealt with.

“…”

Tsuchimikado Motoharu was waiting for someone on a metal bridge in District 7. As he looked down at the river flowing below at the same rate as ever, he heard quiet footsteps approaching him. Despite hearing them, he did not turn around. While still leaning against the railing, he waited for the footsteps to walk up behind him.

Finally…

Tsuchimikado opened his mouth to speak.

“Is your eye okay?”

“It’s been eight hours. That was enough time to transplant a new one in and get used to it. It doesn’t even feel like I have something in my eye anymore.”

“That’s good,” he muttered.

The strained atmosphere did not disappear.

The girl behind him asked, “Are you ready?”

“Do you really think I wouldn’t be?”

“I see,” was the only reply.

In the next moment, several gunshots rang out and Tsuchimikado felt a burning pain in his back.

Kumokawa Seria held a large military handgun in her right hand.

As Tsuchimikado was leaning on the railing, the impact sent him tumbling over it. While bleeding, he fell into the river. Kumokawa heard a loud splash. She moved forward and looked down into the river with unfeeling eyes.

She hid the gun below her clothes and instead pulled out a handheld device.

She was of course calling Kaizumi Tsugutoshi of the board of directors.

“Is it over?” he asked.

“I have finished the execution.”

The incident had ended and Tsuchimikado Maika had been protected from Yakumi Hisako’s organization that had been running the Agitate Halation project. However, that did not tie up all the loose ends. If something was not done, the battle would never end. If it was all left up into exchanges of emotion, Tsuchimikado Maika would end up involved again at some point.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu had realized that and had offered up his own life to avoid it.

“Will you be retrieving the body?” asked Kaizumi.

“No. Someone will pick it up for us. …We know each other fairly well, after all. If we took care of the body, it would create some strange conspiracy theories. People would claim the execution was an act and that he was secretly living somewhere after we announced he was dead.”

“I see. So it is best to let our enemies pick him up.”

“Exactly. Of course, a simple investigation here would show I wasn’t using some cheap trick like firing blanks.”

With that offhand comment, Kumokawa Seria ended the call.

She looked back down into the river, but Tsuchimikado’s body had already flowed downstream. She could only see the clear surface of the river.

(Now then.)

Kumokawa Seria now thought silently so no one could overhear her.

(That should convince those that were watching the execution. Those paint rounds had his blood inside. That should help fool the forensics team Tsuchimikado’s enemies will send.)

What mattered was convincing them.

Even if it came out later that Tsuchimikado had survived, they would not pursue him any further after they had given the sign that they were convinced. That was the etiquette of underground society. And that was why those watching the execution would be so careful in their initial determination of his death. They would have sent specialists out.

However, Kumokawa Seria was not exactly a kind person.

After all, she had fired several paint rounds at his back from close range when he was not wearing a bulletproof vest.

It would not have killed him, but the impact would have been quite something. It could very easily have knocked him unconscious. And he had then been dropped right into the river. Even with that trick, his life was still in danger. Kumokawa felt it was a fair punishment for taking her eye.

She had no reason to save Tsuchimikado Motoharu for nothing in exchange.

If he was her enemy, she would kill him. If he needed to be executed, she would not hesitate to carry out the "ceremony".

The reason she had not done that here was quite simple.

(I need to thank him for not telling that boy about me. …That really is all there is to it.)

Hamazura Shiage was in a District 7 hospital.

His injuries were the type that would raise questions yet Anti-Skill was not hanging around outside the hospital room. He felt like he had been placed atop a conveyer belt to prevent a commotion. Something about it all seemed strange.

"Hey."

It was just past noon when someone called out to him in the hospital hallway.

It was Kuroyoru Umidori who was sitting in a wheelchair in the rest space next to a line of vending machines.

When he saw who it was, Hamazura was not sure what to say.

"…Um, we both had a pretty rough time of it, didn't we?"

"At least you're still alive," replied Kamijou Touma.

All three of them had white bandages wrapped all over their bodies. If they showed up in a school at night, they could likely start a new ghost story.

Kamijou must not have been at his best either because he was leaning up against one of the vending machines against the wall.

“From what the doctor told me, you two had it worse than me. How bad is it?”

“I’m just here for the time being to be safe. Kuroyoru will probably take a while, though.”

“It’s not a problem.” Kuroyoru took her hands off of the handles connected to the wheelchair’s wheels and playfully spread her arms. Her overall movements were awkward, but her arms moved oddly smoothly. “As long as I can move my arms, I’ll have no problem living in the hospital. And it isn’t like my injuries will have any lasting effects.”

“?”

Kamijou frowned slightly.

He could not quite place his finger on it, but he felt like there was something a bit different about how Kuroyoru was acting.

When she noticed him looking at her, Kuroyoru looked away slightly.

“…I’ll be fine. If you say anything unnecessary, I’ll kill you,” she said in an oddly low voice.

It seemed there was something she did not want them to bring up, so Kamijou and Hamazura did not say anything more.

Hamazura had been forced out of the fight partway through, so he had a few questions for Kamijou.

“So how much did you find out?”

“It’s hard to say.” Kamijou gave a heavy sigh. “That cyborg named Rensa was defeated. She was completely destroyed, so she won’t attack again in revenge or anything.”

“I guess we can relax for the moment then,” said Hamazura in disgust.

He may have been plagued with nightmares of some immortal monster continuing to walk toward him through the flames even after being hit by a tanker truck and blown up along with an entire building.

Kamijou’s image of her had been different.

“Her machine heart was destroyed.”

“What?”

“That isn’t something my right hand can do. It may simply have been destroyed as she lost control, but…”

He did not think that was what had happened.

From what #029 had said while controlling Rensa at the very end and from what Fremea had told him afterwards that had sounded like a dream, he knew that the monster known as Yakumi Hisako had been brought inside the cyborg body and that had started to destroy the cyborg.

And Kamijou Touma's right hand could negate any and all supernatural powers.

What if #029 had wanted to protect Yakumi Hisako at all costs?

Was it possible she had destroyed her own heart to throw off the balance of her body enough that it lost its functionality as an output point that could take in esper powers and supernatural beings? Was it possible she had done that to expel Yakumi Hisako to let her escape?

What they had done was by no means praiseworthy.

However, that decision #029 had made just before her defeat prevented Kamijou from feeling nothing but scorn for her.

In that moment, #029 had crushed her own heart to protect the person she cared about most.

In that instant, she may have surpassed Kamijou Touma.

"I know that someone named Yakumi Hisako was behind all this. I know that Fremea Seivelun was placed at the center of a project known as Agitate Halation. But beyond that, I know nothing. Although it seems all sorts of dangerous things were found in the university hospital Yakumi Hisako used as a base."

"…And you're satisfied with that?" whispered Kuroyoru. She sounded half in shock. "Then it's over. The truth will never come to light. Once those 'dangerous things' are found, it's over. No one will find the truly dangerous things hidden further in. The truly dangerous things are the ones that would make anyone who sees them go insane."

Hamazura frowned.

"Are you saying there are still people out there who will try to use Agitate Halation?"

"It doesn't have to be anyone directly related to the project. There are people who don't want the light of day to reach the darkness in any form. Good and evil, likes and dislikes, gains and losses, strength and weakness… All sorts of things are wrapped around a single organization. This will be covered up for many different reasons."

"…"

Hamazura fell silent for a moment.

Even after World War III, the city's malice was as strong as ever.

In fact, being destroyed once may have caused it to mutate into something even worse.

"I know that," replied Kamijou with a bit of bitterness mixed in. He pulled out two hard objects from his pocket. "That's why I retrieved these."

They were transparent cylindrical containers about as thick as a little finger. They contained something red.

Hamazura could not even guess what they were.

"Even after that huge incident, you were still running around doing things? You didn't head straight to a hospital bed?"

"…"

While Hamazura asked questions, Kuroyoru stared at the containers with a grim look in her eyes. As a cyborg herself, she may have guessed what they were.

Kamijou sighed and said, "This one is #028 and this one is #029. Apparently they're still alive even like this. …Up to #40 were stored in Yakumi Hisako's lab. They were all forced to operate that cyborg and they were left on standby when not in use. When not placed inside the mechanical cerebrum and cerebellum prepared inside Rensa, they cannot even think."

The possibility for a flawless victory had never been there.

That was what #029 had told him from within Rensa. If enough cyborg bodies identical to Rensa were created, they could be given a certain sort of freedom. But that could not happen. The meaning behind Rensa was so great that even an amateur high school boy like Kamijou understood it.

There was no way to save them.

At the very least, there was no way in the current social system of Academy City.

Kuroyoru Umidori stared at the finger-sized brains and asked Kamijou a question.

"What are you going to do with them?"

"I gathered all of them up to #40, so for now I'm going to have them put in cold storage. I don't like it, but all I can do is buy them time until some real method of saving them is found. I can only hope that a method of allowing

them to walk around like normal people will be completed with the next generation of technology."

Kamijou returned the containers for #028 and #029 to his pocket.

He turned his back on Hamazura and Kuroyoru perhaps to go hand those containers over to a doctor.

Hamazura called out to his back without thinking.

"What are you going to do now?"

"The same thing as always," replied Kamijou Touma without turning around. "No matter how many times I reach game over and no matter how many times I must pathetically hit continue, I will not stop moving forward."

"Honestly, my shoulders are so stiff," said a carefree voice along the path to the hospital.

A nun in a white habit walked along that path with a schoolgirl wearing the maid uniform of a certain maid school. The one in the maid uniform was sitting seiza-style on a drum-shaped cleaning robot.

The schoolgirl was lightly massaging her own shoulders.

"When I suddenly received a request to clean an external institution as an extracurricular activity, I was wondering where it was. I never thought it would be an automated factory in District 17! It was so dirty!! And oil stains in a car factory are not an opponent a maid should have to fight!"

"Touma didn't come home for an entire day."

"And then Ryouran Maid School tells me it must have been a misunderstanding because they know nothing about it! I spent all night making it squeaky clean and I don't even get any credit points for it!!"

"Touma really is stupid!! There was nothing but bread, cereal, biscuits, canned food, ham, bacon, bananas, and apples in the room! Does he not know that people can starve to death!?"

"Honestly, what is wrong with this world?"

"I know! It's so hard to get by!!"

The two girls were as indignant as ever.

And they had no way of knowing just how much had been fought to protect that.

A certain elementary school in District 13 was filled with chaos once more.

The dispute would likely continue all the way to December 25.

“Nyah! Santa really does exist!! Why can’t you understand something so simple!?”

“You liar! There’s no way Santa Claus exists!! I heard the trivia king on TV saying his clothes are only red due to a soda advertisement!!”

“Nyah, nyah! That’s a conspiracy. They’re lying so they can hog all the presents for themselves!!”

“Don’t be stupid!! The adults don’t get any presents!!”

“In the first place, you’re already being tricked. The adults actually-…!!”

Fremea and the others were almost grappling each other with no concern for boy or girl.

And then the intellectual girl (with glasses) nervously spoke up.

“U-um…Fremea-chan?”

“Nyah! In the first place, what is it!?”

“Then is that black Santa Claus I saw before real, too?”

Previously, this may have temporarily wrapped Fremea’s class in terror just like when they discussed the mysterious people spotted after school. To make sure they did not forget the magic words that would save them, they might have begun reciting them.

But that is not what happened this time.

Fremea puffed out her chest and blew air from her nose proudly.

“Nyah! Don’t worry. In the first place, I’ll do something about that!!”

A frightening incident had occurred.

A lot of people had been hurt. Something even greater had been lost.

However, it did not end there. Something had been gained from it all.

If one continued forward, one could grab it.

Afterword

To those who have bought one volume at a time: welcome back. To those who bought them all at once: welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

Okay! This was a science side story!! But with Kamijou Touma in a leading role, it cannot be said to be wholly science. Then again, it didn't have any magic mixed in, so it falls along an odd line. This may be one of the benefits of having that spiky-haired boy walk through so many different worlds in the course of the incidents he has experienced.

Here in Volume 7, I brought out a lot of the material I had been building up since the start of New Testament. I had been thinking for a while that this kind of surprise turn of events wouldn't be too out of place if the series continued this long. And one of the reasons I added New Testament to the title was because Academy City has finally made it "this far".

A boy who sacrifices everything to get vengeance for his step sister, a brain that rules over the darkness with nothing but her speaking skills, a cyborg that uses up multiple brains to keep a single body running, an AIM thought being that abandoned her physical body, a gathering of the Level 5s, and even an artificial heroine who can freely lead around all of the heroes. …I think this volume was filled with a lot of crazy people that just scream "Made in Academy City". What did you think?

I give my thanks to my illustrator Haimura-san and my editor Miki-san. With a cyborg and a formless final boss, this had to be one of the most troublesome volumes to deal with. I am truly thankful that they stuck with me this time as well.

And I give my thanks to all the readers. I think it is thanks to how accepting you all are that I can write these stories that lean all the way to one side or the other of magic or science. I hope you will stick with me from now on too.

It is time to close the pages for now while praying that the pages of the next book will be opened.

And I lay my pen down for now.

Heroes must work on a floating exchange rate. It causes problems when there are too many of them.

-Kamachi Kazuma

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